MANHUNT

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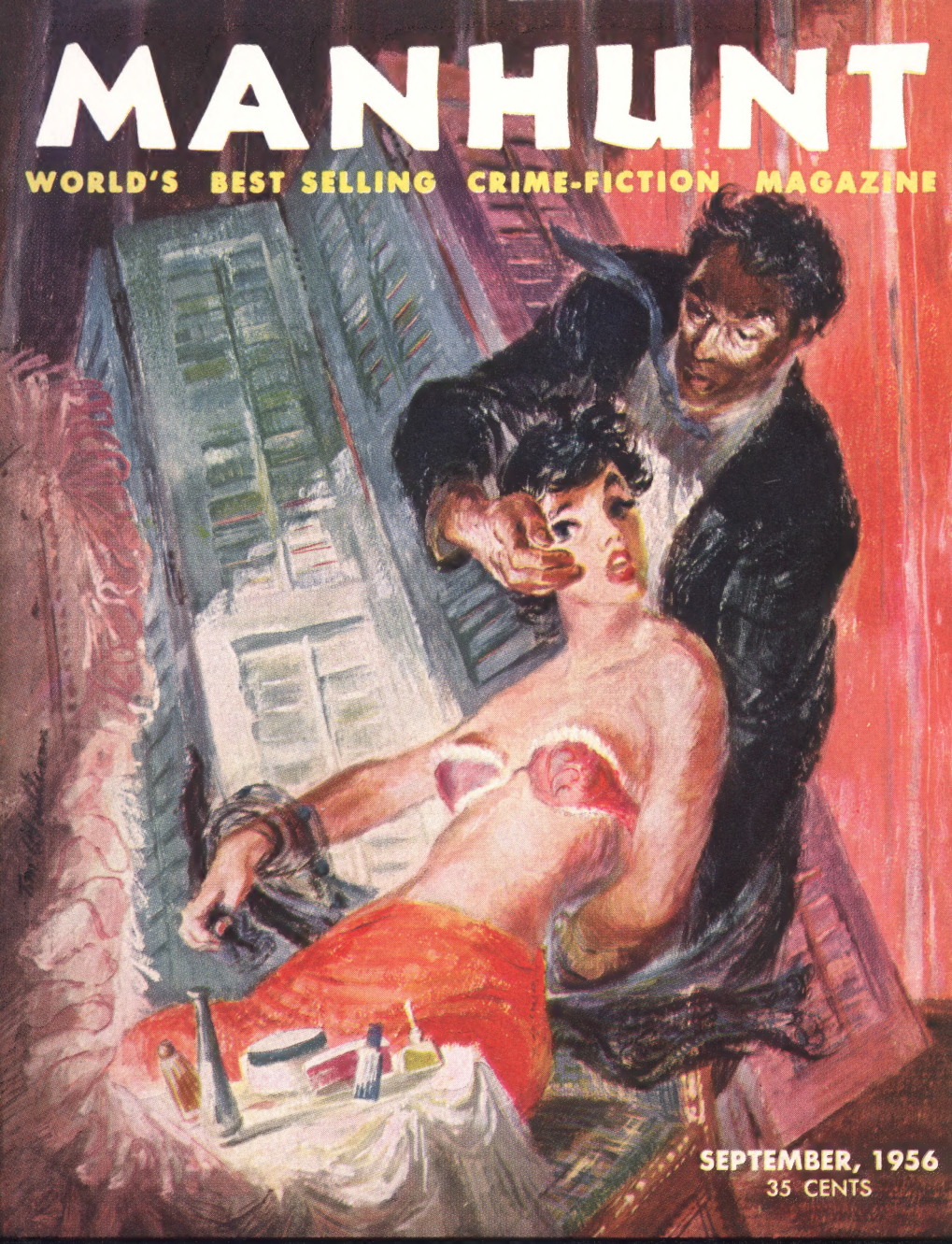

SEPTEMBER, 1956
35 CENTS

EVAN HUNTER'S *"THE LAST SPIN"*

12 NEW STORIES BY OTHER OUTSTANDING AUTHORS

VOL. 4, NO. 9

MANHUNT

SEPTEMBER, 1956

Cover by Tom O'Sullivan

CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

THE SEALED ENVELOPE *by Allen Lang* 64
INVITATION TO MURDER *by Albert Simmons* 105

SHORT STORIES

THE LAST SPIN *by Evan Hunter* 1
FISH-MARKET MURDER *by Robert S. Swenson* 8
BADGE OF DISHONOR *by Norman Struber* 13
"SORRY, MISTER . . ." *by C. L. Sweeney, Jr.* 24
BRUSKY'S FAULT *by Robert Plate* 31
THE SECRET *by Stuart Friedman* 38
ANYTHING GOES *by Hal Ellson* 51
THE PARTNERS *by Jack Ritchie* 87
REACH FOR THE CLOUDS *by Bob Bristow* 95
DEAD PEOPLE ARE NEVER ANGRY *by C. B. Gilford* 125
WEBSTER STREET LUSH *by James M. Ullman* 133

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The Last Spin

BY EVAN HUNTER

THE BOY sitting opposite him was his enemy.

The boy sitting opposite him was called Tigo, and he wore a green silk jacket with an orange stripe on each sleeve. The jacket told Danny that Tigo was his enemy. The jacket shrieked, "Enemy, enemy!"

"This is a good piece," Tigo said, indicating the gun on the table. "This runs you close to forty-five bucks, you try to buy it in a

He put the .38 to his temple. The firing pin clicked on an empty chamber. He handed the gun to Tigo...

store. That's a lot of money."

The gun on the table was a Smith & Wesson .38 Police Special.

It rested exactly in the center of the table, its sawed-off, two-inch barrel abruptly terminating the otherwise lethal grace of the weapon. There was a checked walnut stock on the gun, and the gun was finished in a flat blue. Alongside the gun were three .38 Special cartridges.

Danny looked at the gun disinterestedly. He was nervous and apprehensive, but he kept tight control of his face. He could not show Tigo what he was feeling. Tigo was the enemy, and so he presented a mask to the enemy, cocking one eyebrow and saying, "I seen pieces before. There's nothing special about this one."

"Except what we got to do with it," Tigo said. Tigo was studying him with large brown eyes. The eyes were moist-looking. He was not a bad-looking kid, Tigo, with thick black hair and maybe a nose that was too long, but his mouth and chin were good. You could usually tell a cat by his mouth and his chin. Tigo would not turkey out of this particular rumble. Of that, Danny was sure.

"Why don't we start?" Danny asked. He wet his lips and looked across at Tigo.

"You understand," Tigo said, "I got no bad blood for you."

"I understand."

"This is what the club said. This is how the club said we should settle it. Without a big street diddlebop, you dig? But I want you to know I don't know you from a hole in the wall—except you wear a blue and gold jacket."

"And you wear a green and orange one," Danny said, "and that's enough for me."

"Sure, but what I was trying to say . . . "

"We going to sit and talk all night, or we going to get this thing rolling?" Danny asked.

"What I'm trying to say," Tigo went on, "is that I just happened to be picked for this, you know? Like to settle this thing that's between the two clubs. I mean, you got to admit your boys shouldn't have come in our territory last night."

"I got to admit nothing," Danny said flatly.

"Well, anyway, they shot at the candy store. That wasn't right. There's supposed to be a truce on."

"Okay, okay," Danny said.

"So like . . . like this is the way we agreed to settle it. I mean, one of us and . . . and one of you. Fair and square. Without any street boppin', and without any law trouble."

"Let's get on with it," Danny said.

"I'm trying to say, I never even seen you on the street before this. So this ain't nothin' personal with me. Whichever way it turns out, like . . . "

"I never seen you neither," Danny said.

Tigo stared at him for a long time. "That's 'cause you're new around here. Where you from originally?"

"My people come down from the Bronx."

"You got a big family?"

"A sister and two brothers, that's all."

"Yeah, I only got a sister." Tigo shrugged. "Well." He sighed. "So." He sighed again. "Let's make it, huh?"

"I'm waitin'," Danny said.

Tigo picked up the gun, and then he took one of the cartridges from the table top. He broke open the gun, slid the cartridge into the cylinder, and then snapped the gun shut and twirled the cylinder. "Round and round she goes," he said, "and where she stops, nobody knows. There's six chambers in the cylinder and only one cartridge. That makes the odds five-to-one that the cartridge'll be in firing position when the cylinder stops whirling. You dig?"

"I dig."

"I'll go first," Tigo said.

Danny looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"You want to go first?"

"I don't know."

"I'm giving you a break." Tigo grinned. "I may blow my head off first time out."

"Why you giving me a break?" Danny asked.

Tigo shrugged. "What the hell's the difference?" He gave the cylinder a fast twirl.

"The Russians invented this, huh?" Danny asked.

"Yeah."

"I always said they was crazy bastards."

"Yeah, I always . . . " Tigo stopped talking. The cylinder was stopped now. He took a deep breath, put the barrel of the .38 to his temple, and then squeezed the trigger.

The firing pin clicked on an empty chamber.

"Well, that was easy, wasn't it?" he asked. He shoved the gun across the table. "Your turn, Danny."

Danny reached for the gun. It was cold in the basement room, but he was sweating now. He pulled the gun toward him, then left it on the table while he dried his palms on his trousers. He picked up the gun then and stared at it.

"It's a nifty piece," Tigo said "I like a good piece."

"Yeah, I do too," Danny said. "You can tell a good piece just by the way it feels in your hand."

Tigo looked surprised. "I mentioned that to one of the guys yesterday, and he thought I was nuts."

"Lots of guys don't know about pieces," Danny said, shrugging.

"I was thinking," Tigo said, "when I get old enough, I'll join the Army, you know? I'd like to work around pieces."

"I thought of that, too. I'd join

now, only my old lady won't give me permission. She's got to sign if I join now."

"Yeah, they're all the same," Tigo said, smiling. "Your old lady born here or the old country?"

"The old country," Danny said.

"Yeah, well, you know they got these old-fashioned ideas."

"I better spin," Danny said.

"Yeah," Tigo agreed.

Danny slapped the cylinder with his left hand. The cylinder whirled, whirled, and then stopped. Slowly, Danny put the gun to his head. He wanted to close his eyes, but he didn't dare. Tigo, the enemy, was watching him. He returned Tigo's stare, and then he squeezed the trigger.

His heart skipped a beat, and then over the roar of his blood he heard the empty click. Hastily, he put the gun down on the table.

"Makes you sweat, don't it?" Tigo said.

Danny nodded, saying nothing. He watched Tigo. Tigo was looking at the gun.

"Me now, huh?" Tigo said. He took a deep breath, then picked up the .38. He twirled the cylinder, waited for it to stop, and then put the gun to his head.

"Bang!" Tigo said, and then he squeezed the trigger. Again, the firing pin clicked on an empty chamber. Tigo let out his breath and put the gun down.

"I thought I was dead that time," he said.

"I could hear the harps," Danny said.

"This is a good way to lose weight, you know that?" Tigo laughed nervously, and then his laugh became honest when he saw that Danny was laughing with him. "Ain't it the truth? You could lose ten pounds this way."

"My old lady's like a house," Danny said, laughing. "She ought to try this kind of a diet." He laughed at his own humor, pleased when Tigo joined him.

"That's the trouble," Tigo said. "You see a nice deb in the street, you think it's crazy, you know? Then they get to be our people's age, and they turn to fat." He shook his head.

"You got a chick?" Danny asked.

"Yeah, I got one."

"What's her name?"

"Aw, you don't know her."

"Maybe I do," Danny said.

"Her name is Juana." Tigo watched him. "She's about five-two, got these brown eyes . . ."

"I think I know her," Danny said. He nodded. "Yeah, I think I know her."

"She's nice, ain't she?" Tigo asked. He leaned forward, as if Danny's answer was of great importance to him.

"Yeah, she's nice," Danny said.

"The guys rib me about her. You know, all they're after . . . well, you know . . . they don't understand something like Juana."

"I got a chick, too," Danny said.

"Yeah. Hey maybe sometime we could . . . " Tigo cut himself short. He looked down at the gun, and his sudden enthusiasm seemed to ebb completely. "It's your turn," he said.

"Here goes nothing," Danny said. He twirled the cylinder, sucked in his breath, and then fired.

The empty click was loud in the stillness of the room.

"Man!" Danny said.

"We're pretty lucky, you know?" Tigo said.

"So far."

"We better lower the odds. The boys won't like it if we . . . " He stopped himself again, and then reached for one of the cartridges on the table. He broke open the gun again, and slipped the second cartridge into the cylinder. "Now we got two cartridges in here," he said. "Two cartridges, six chambers. That's four-to-two. Divide it, and you get two-to-one." He paused. "You game?"

"That's . . . that's what we're here for, ain't it?"

"Sure."

"Okay then."

"Gone," Tigo said, nodding his head. "You got courage, Danny."

"You're the one needs the courage," Danny said gently. "It's your spin."

Tigo lifted the gun. Idly, he began spinning the cylinder.

"You live on the next block, don't you?" Danny asked.

"Yeah." Tigo kept slapping the cylinder. It spun with a gently whirring sound.

"That's how come we never crossed paths, I guess. Also, I'm new on the scene."

"Yeah, well you know, you get hooked up with one club, that's the way it is."

"You like the guys on your club?" Danny asked, wondering why he was asking such a stupid question, listening to the whirring of the cylinder at the same time.

"They're okay." Tigo shrugged. "None of them really send me, but that's the club on my block, so what're you gonna do, huh?" His hand left the cylinder. It stopped spinning. He put the gun to his head.

"Wait!" Danny said.

Tigo looked puzzled. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to say . . . I mean . . . " Danny frowned. "I don't dig too many of the guys on my club, either."

Tigo nodded. For a moment, their eyes locked. Then Tigo shrugged, and fired.

The empty click filled the basement room.

"Phew," Tigo said.

"Man, you can say that again."

Tigo slid the gun across the table.

Danny hesitated an instant. He did not want to pick up the gun. He felt sure that this time the firing pin would strike the percus-

sion cap of one of the cartridges. He was sure that this time he would shoot himself.

"Sometimes I think I'm turkey," he said to Tigo, surprised that his thoughts had found voice.

"I feel that way sometimes, too," Tigo said.

"I never told that to nobody," Danny said. "The guys on my club would laugh at me, I ever told them that."

"Some things you got to keep to yourself. There ain't nobody you can trust in this world."

"There should be somebody you can trust," Danny said. "Hell, you can't tell nothing to your people. They don't understand."

Tigo laughed. "That's an old story. But that's the way things are. What're you gonna do?"

"Yeah. Still, sometimes I think I'm turkey."

"Sure, sure," Tigo said. "It ain't only that, though. Like sometimes . . . well, don't you wonder what you're doing stomping some guy in the street? Like . . . you know what I mean? Like . . . who's the guy to you? What you got to beat him up for? 'Cause he messed with somebody else's girl?" Tigo shook his head. "It gets complicated sometimes."

"Yeah, but . . . " Danny frowned again. "You got to stick with the club. Don't you?"

"Sure, sure . . . hell yes." Again, their eyes locked.

"Well, here goes," Danny said. He lifted the gun. "It's just . . ." He shook his head, and then twirled the cylinder. The cylinder spun, and then stopped. He studied the gun, wondering if one of the cartridges would roar from the barrel when he squeezed the trigger.

Then he fired.

Click.

"I didn't think you was going through with it," Tigo said.

"I didn't neither."

"You got heart, Danny," Tigo said. He looked at the gun. He picked it up and broke it open.

"What you doing?" Danny asked.

"Another cartridge," Tigo said. "Six chambers, *three* cartridges. That makes it even money. You game?"

"You?"

"The boys said . . . " Tigo stopped talking. "Yeah, I'm game," he added, his voice curiously low.

"It's your turn, you know."

"I know."

Danny watched as Tigo picked up the gun.

"You ever been rowboating on the lake?"

Tigo looked across the table at Danny, his eyes wide. "Once," he said. "I went with Juana."

"Is it . . . is it any kicks?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it's grand kicks. You mean you never been?"

"No," Danny said.

"Hey, you got to try it, man," Tigo said excitedly. "You'll like it.

Hey, you try it."

"Yeah, I was thinking maybe this Sunday I'd . . . " He did not complete the sentence.

"My spin," Tigo said wearily. He twirled the cylinder. "Here goes a good man," he said, and he put the revolver to his head and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

Danny smiled nervously. "No rest for the weary," he said. "But Jesus you've got heart. I don't know if I can go through with it."

"Sure, you can," Tigo assured him. "Listen, what's there to be afraid of?" He slid the gun across the table.

"We keep this up all night?" Danny asked.

"They said . . . you know . . . "

"Well, it ain't so bad. I mean, hell, we didn't have this operation, we wouldn'ta got a chance to talk, huh?" He grinned feebly.

"Yeah," Tigo said, his face splitting in a wide grin. "It ain't been so bad, huh?"

"No, it's been . . . well, you know, these guys on the club, who can talk to them?"

He picked up the gun.

"We could . . . " Tigo started.

"What?"

"We could say . . . well . . . like we kept shootin' an' nothing happened, so . . . " Tigo shrugged. "What the hell! We can't do this all night, can we?"

"I don't know."

"Let's make this the last spin. Listen, they don't like it, they can take a flying leap, you know?"

"I don't think they'll like it. We supposed to settle this for the clubs."

"Screw the clubs!" Tigo said. "Can't we pick our own . . . " The word was hard coming. When it came, his eyes did not leave Danny's face. " . . . friends?"

"Sure, we can," Danny said vehemently. "Sure we can! Why not?"

"The last spin," Tigo said. "Come on, the last spin."

"Gone," Danny said. "Hey, you know, I'm *glad* they got this idea. You know that? I'm actually glad!" He twirled the cylinder. "Look, you want to go on the lake this Sunday? I mean, with your girl and mine? We could get two boats. Or even one if you want."

"Yeah, one boat," Tigo said. "Hey, your girl'll like Juana, I mean it. She's a swell chick."

The cylinder stopped. Danny put the gun to his head quickly.

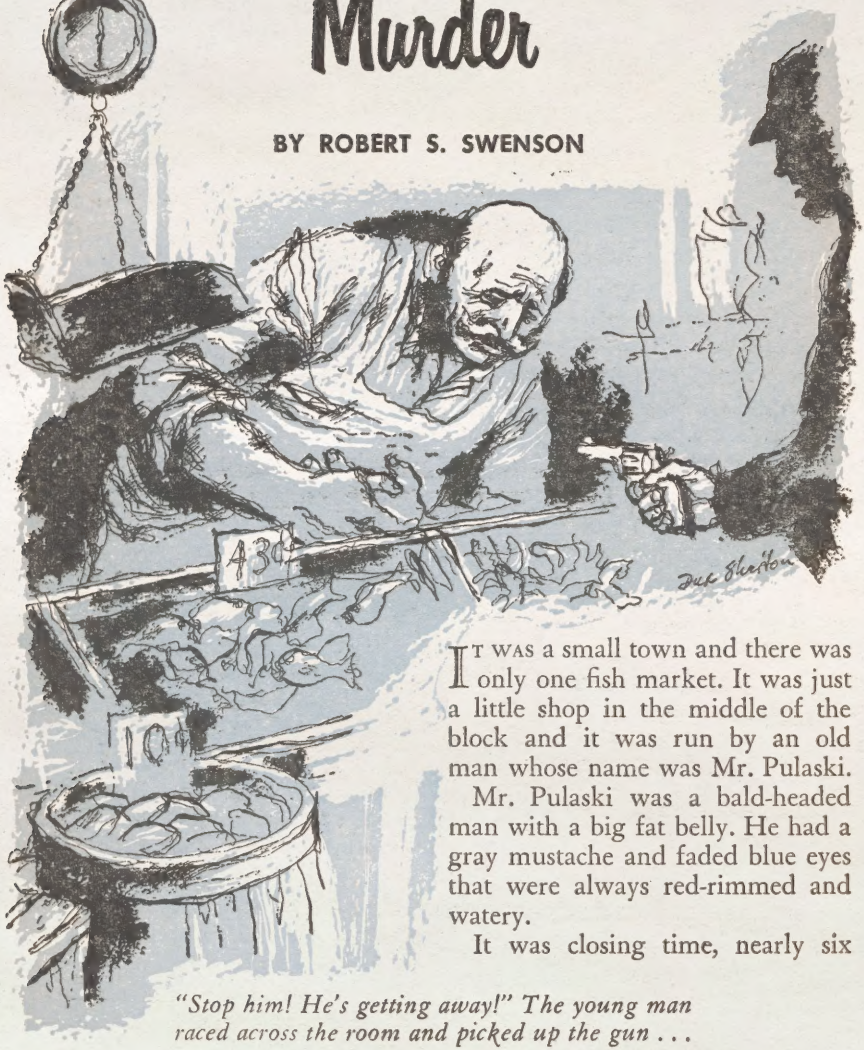
"Here's to Sunday," he said. He grinned at Tigo, and Tigo grinned back, and then Danny fired.

The explosion rocked the small basement room, ripping away half of Danny's head, shattering his face. A small sharp cry escaped Tigo's throat, and a look of incredulous shock knifed his eyes.

Then he put his head on the table and began weeping.

Fish-Market Murder

BY ROBERT S. SWENSON



"Stop him! He's getting away!" The young man raced across the room and picked up the gun . . .

IT WAS a small town and there was only one fish market. It was just a little shop in the middle of the block and it was run by an old man whose name was Mr. Pulaski.

Mr. Pulaski was a bald-headed man with a big fat belly. He had a gray mustache and faded blue eyes that were always red-rimmed and watery.

It was closing time, nearly six

'o'clock, and Mr. Pulaski had already counted and bagged the money and cached it away in his hiding place. He had left only a few dollars in the cash register to finish out the day.

The mechanical signal bell tinkled on the door, and a small, very thin man came in. He was wearing a brown tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows. He had on a green sleeveless sweater and his pants were shiny at the knees and baggy.

The little man closed the door taking extreme care that the little bell didn't ring again. He had his head tucked way down, and as he walked towards Mr. Pulaski, he gave him a series of quick, secret glances. He walked to the counter and he cleared his throat softly. He said something to Mr. Pulaski.

Mr. Pulaski pushed his belly against the counter and leaned toward the little man. "I can't hear you so good," he said. It was a booming voice.

The little man flinched and blinked his eyes, but he held his ground. He cleared his throat again and then Mr. Pulaski leaned even farther forward so that the little man was looking directly at his big bald head.

He spoke to the baldhead. "Two pounds of haddock to fry."

Mr. Pulaski straightened up and for a second he looked at the little man. Then he turned around and lifted the cover of the fish bin. "Two pounds of haddock to fry," he said. His voice shook the little man.

Mr. Pulaski pulled a fish out of the bin and with quick, powerful motions he began chopping up the fish.

He weighed the fish and wrapped it, and the little man had just exchanged his money for a white paper package when the bell on the door tinkled again.

Like the other man, this man was very thin, but he was nearly six feet tall. He was wearing a green Navy jacket, soiled and torn, and a shapeless, grease-covered felt hat that was pulled down over his eyes. He kept both hands in his pockets.

He stood just inside the door, and with one long turn of his head he searched the room. He took a step into the room, and then looking directly at Mr. Pulaski, he withdrew a small pistol from his pocket.

Instantly, the little man sucked in his breath and made a thin, high-pitched noise. Mr. Pulaski didn't move. But his mouth fell open and his eyes widened until they were like the eyes of the haddock. He was staring at the gun.

The man walked quickly to Mr. Pulaski and waved his gun at the cash register. "Open it!" He looked fierce and self-confident.

Without taking his eyes off the gun, Mr. Pulaski reached over and punched a key, and the cash drawer

rang open with a jangling sound.

The man stuck his fist into the drawer and raked out the bills. He started to stuff them into his pocket, but then he stopped and withdrew his hand again and he looked at the bills. There were only seven dollars.

He stuffed the money into his pocket and yanked out the metal cash box and looked under it. He slammed the box against the fish bin and the box burst apart in an explosion of small change. And then he reached into the cash drawer again and took out a big silver coin.

The man looked at the coin and then he looked at Mr. Pulaski. "What's this?"

"My lucky piece," Mr. Pulaski said. "You don't want that. Please. It's a foreign coin. It's worth nothing."

The man looked at the coin again, and then he looked at Mr. Pulaski. He hefted the coin and then he shrugged his shoulders and dropped the coin into his pocket.

Instantly, Mr. Pulaski came to life. He made a hoarse choking sound and he reached out and grabbed the pistol with his two hands and in the same moment the man fired three times, and Mr. Pulaski crashed back against the fish bin. There appeared three bright red spots on the front of his apron.

For a moment the two men faced each other motionlessly, and then slowly the man looked down at his gun and stared at it as if he couldn't believe what the gun had done. As he did this, he saw again out of the corner of his eye the skinny little man, and he wheeled violently and pointed the gun at him. The little man jerked his hands up almost beyond the ends of his arms. The fish was still in his hand.

The man turned back to Mr. Pulaski. Mr. Pulaski was coming around from behind the counter. He had one hand in a fist at his chest and with the other hand he steadied himself on the cash register. He had a dazed, wild-eyed look, and when he made his way around to the front of the counter, he took his hand from the cash register and reached out toward the little man.

The little man made no move. He just stood there with his hands above his head with the white paper package in his hand. Mr. Pulaski staggered for a step and then crumpled onto the floor. He fell on his side, rolling over onto his back. He groaned and they both looked down at him.

From the corner of his mouth there came a thin, crooked line of blood. He was clawing feebly at the patch of blood on the front of his apron. And then he arched his back slightly, raising himself up onto one shoulder. He let out a long soft sigh and then his body settled back slowly onto the floor.

And in a moment he was dead.

And then, suddenly, out on the sidewalk they could hear footsteps running toward the fish market. The killer looked at the door and then he snapped his head around and looked at the little man. The little man was still standing with his hands above his head. He was staring at Mr. Pulaski.

The killer looked at the door again and then he stepped forward and pushed the gun into the little man's hand. He closed the little man's fingers around the butt of the gun, and just as he stepped back again, the door burst open and a young man in a bright orange sweater came charging in.

The killer shouted at the young man. "Watch it! He's got a gun!" The young man saw the situation at once and skidded to a stop. He was standing only three feet in front of the little man. The little man was holding the gun in one hand and the white paper package in the other and his hands were still high above his head.

He looked at the killer and at the young man, and then he lowered the hand that held the gun and he looked at the gun. And as he did this the young man swung his hand around in a wide arc and struck the little man's arm and the gun went flying across the room. It slammed against the wall and bounced onto the floor and slid to a stop in front of the big fish market window.

The killer shouted again. "Get the gun. Don't let him run away." And as soon as he said "run away," the little man started running away. He ran for the door and yanked it open with his two hands.

"Get the gun," the killer shouted. "Don't let him get away. Get the gun."

The young man ran across the room and picked up the gun.

The little man was out the door and the killer shouted again. "Stop him! He's getting away! He's a murderer. Don't let him get away. Stop him!"

The young man brought the gun up and fired three shots through the fish market window as the little man ran by. The whole window crashed onto the sidewalk in great flying chunks of glass, and the killer and the young man ran out of the fish market. When they got to the sidewalk, they stopped.

The little man was lying on the sidewalk. He was lying in a twisted little heap in the broken glass, half on his back and half on his side. One arm was bent under his body and in the other hand he still clutched his white paper package. A thin river of blood was creeping out from under his body. He was staring at the sky through half-closed eyes.

The young man approached him with great care and knelt down beside him. He shook the little man gently by the shoulder. And then the killer walked up and knelt

down beside the young man.

He looked at the little man and then he patted the young man's shoulder. "Good boy," he said. "You got him. He's dead."

The young man turned his head slowly and looked at the killer. "Dead?" he said softly.

"He had it coming," the killer said.

The young man looked back at the dead little man. "He can't be dead," he said. He put his hand on the little man's body to feel for his heart. He looked back at the killer. "He can't be dead," he said loudly. He grabbed the little man by the shoulders and began shaking him. He still had the gun in his hand. "You can't die," he shouted. "You're still alive."

And then the killer pulled the young man to his feet. Already a crowd of people had begun to gather. "Take it easy," the killer said. "You had to do it. There was no other way. He murdered the old man."

"I didn't want to kill him," the young man said. "I just ran in there because I heard the shots." As he said this he waved the gun around. A woman screamed and the whole crowd scattered in one running, stumbling mass.

"You had to do it," the killer said.

The young man began shaking his head and he was close to tears.

The killer patted the young man on the back. "Don't worry. I'm your witness. I saw the whole thing, didn't I? Nothing's going to happen."

They knelt down beside the little man, and as the young man stared into the little man's face, the killer reached into his own pocket and took out the foreign coin and the seven dollars. He looked once over his shoulder and then he dropped the money loosely beside the young man. The young man was unaware of this.

"Don't worry," the killer said again. "I'm your witness. I saw the whole thing. You just stay here and I'll get the police."

The young man nodded numbly. He did not move. The killer laughed. "Stop worrying," he said. "Everything's going to be all right. You just stay here. I'll get the police and everything will be all settled in no time."

He clapped the young man on the back again. He walked away as the crowd began gathering. He was half way to the end of the block when a policeman came running around the corner.

The killer saw him and began running toward the policeman. He began shouting at him and making frantic motions with his arm for the policeman to hurry up. When the policeman got up to him, the killer spun around and pointed back toward the fish market.

"The fish market," he shouted. "At the fish market. Some crazy kid killed two men."

Badge of Dishonor

Sometimes it can be mighty hard for a cop to make sergeant . . . even posthumously.

BY NORMAN STRUBER

He was sprawled on the floor, flat on his back, the gurgle of death in his throat.

His right eye stared up at me blankly, his left eye wasn't there. The socket was filled with blood, the overflow trickling down his cheek in a bright scarlet stream. He rasped spasmodically, his sunken chest heaving, sucking for air, fighting to hold onto every ounce of life left in him.

I stooped beside him, my hand reaching for his wrist. He was still alive, but his pulse was weak, almost imperceptible to my fingers. I stood and glanced at the .45 laying on the floor at his feet, conscious of the sharp stench of cordite still in the room. I moved quickly

to the phone.

I dialed headquarters and asked to speak to the Lieutenant. He came on shortly. "Bulick, sir," I said. "They got to Sarillo. I'm in his apartment now. There's a .45 slug in his brain. He's still alive, but not for long."

"Dammit, Bulick, I told you to watch him!"

"I did, sir. I was right outside the building. It all happened so damn fast. I . . ."

"Did you call an ambulance?"

"Not yet, sir. I . . ."

"Christ, Bulick! Even a rookie knows the first thing you . . ."

"I'll get one right away, sir."

"Never mind!" There was a pause and I heard Lieutenant Reis bark orders to have an ambulance sent out right away. When he came back on, he was still fuming, his gravel voice grating against my eardrum. "You lame-brain, what the hell have you been doing? You were supposed to be watching him, protecting him!"

"I told you, Lieutenant, I . . ."

"You know Sarillo's the break we've been looking for! He's got to live, you hear!"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, but I don't think there's much we can do. I checked the back of his head. There's no point of exit. The slug's still in there and he must be hemorrhaging internally."

"All right, *Doctor* Bulick," he growled sarcastically, "don't let anybody into the apartment. And don't touch anything until the lab boys get there."

"I know that," I said a little angrily.

"You know beans, Bulick. That's what you know."

"I . . ."

"I'll be right over. Do what you can for Sarillo."

"Yes . . ."

He hung up. I cradled the receiver and lit a cigarette, pulled a few deep drags into my lungs, then crushed the butt in an ash tray.

I could hear the people milling around in the hall and I went over to the entrance door and opened it. "All right, good people," I said, "go back to your apartments. This is none of your business."

"What happened?" a woman asked excitedly. "I heard a shot."

"So did I!" someone else said.

"Is he dead? Is Mr. Sarillo dead?"

"Come on now," I said, "go on back to your apartments."

"Who are you?" a man in pajamas asked belligerently.

"Police."

"Let's see your badge."

I flashed my shield and gave the guy an angry look. "Now break it up," I told him, "or would you rather have me break your head?"

"Okay, okay. You don't have to get so tough about it."

I waited until the hall was clear; then I shut the door and went back into the living room. I looked down at Sarillo's frail body. He'd

been pale-looking enough when he still had blood. He was the color of chalk now. There was nothing anybody could do for him. His lips moved silently for a second, as if he were trying to say something. I squatted beside him again. "Go ahead, Sarillo," I said. "What is it? Who shot you?" I had to find out if he knew.

The right eye stared at me for a moment. He seemed to recognize me, and then his body quivered a bit and the eye closed. His chest collapsed slowly as the last breath of air sloughed out of him with a quiet hissing sound.

I checked his pulse, then pressed my ear over his heart. He was still warm, but that was all. His next stop would be the refrigerator downtown. I swallowed the saliva in my throat, all that blood making me feel a little sick to my stomach. I stood and took a handkerchief from my pocket and mopped my face.

What bothered me most was Lieutenant Reis. There was bad blood between us as it was; now I was sure he was going to throw every regulation in the book at me, maybe invent a few more that I'd broken that weren't even in the book. He'd tear me apart and pick my bones clean. The way he looked at it, I'd fouled my assignment by letting someone get to Sarillo before the police did. I thought about it and sweated. I'd been skeptical about ever making Sergeant before I got the Sarillo assignment. After I got it, I figured making Sergeant was a foregone conclusion. But Reis would lay it on hot and heavy now. Which would it be? Suspension? Back to pounding a beat? I could only hope he wouldn't get all the facts.

Sarillo had been a key man in the Morey Lane setup. Morey Lane was the biggest wheel in the state. A syndicate man. Not in the top hierarchy, but no small cheese, either. Lane had made our fair city his home town, with a fifty acre estate for his family in the suburbs, and a high class night spot, Club Indigo, decorating the North end of Main Street. Club Indigo was his conning tower, his base of operations. The city fathers didn't like it, but they could do nothing about it. Like a lot of his kind around the country, Lane had never openly broken the law. He was the big man behind the scenes—president of a closed corporation, so to speak—and he couldn't be touched. He had plenty of money and influence; besides his regular slew of underlings, his tentacles reached inside City Hall.

But a new administration had come in, and their slogan boiled down to "GET LANE." They even went so far as to try to get the cooperation of the F.B.I., but that didn't pan out. Lane had broken no federal laws. The new men in office appealed to the Treasury Department to sock Lane with an in-

come tax evasion rap, but the T-boys, the biggest bogey man for the syndicate troupe, were never able to tag Lane with a mandatory invitation to a T-party. That's where Lane had been a little different; that's where he'd been shrewdest.

That's where Sarillo fit in.

Lane had never been clipped for income tax evasion, either because he'd never actually held out on Uncle Sam, or there was a genius filing his reports who could bend figures to make it look as though Lane was just another sweet citizen. On advice from the government boys, our Department suspected the latter. And Sarillo was the man, the brain, the figure juggler who could supply enough evidence to bust Lane wide open.

It was Lieutenant Reis' idea, his plan. He'd obtained permission from the Commissioner to follow it up. Reis' brain storm was to pull one of the props out from under Lane. Don't fool with the little guys, the guys who just work for a week's salary and probably never even met Lane. Get to the top, was Reis' theory. Pluck out one of the big props. Reis had sorted out Sarillo as the Police Department's "man-of-the-year." Sarillo was picked up for minor traffic violations, on trumped up charges of disturbing the peace, for violation of public health laws. Yeah, we got him once for spitting on the sidewalk. And it had been working; Reis had picked the right man. Reis was a bastard, but he was a smart cop. Sarillo's nervous system couldn't take the strain. Sarillo knew he had nothing to look forward to but a miserable life in this town. He knew his only salvation was to tell us what we wanted to know.

Sarillo began to crack. He wasn't sure which way he should turn. He didn't want to be the Department's whipping boy, but he didn't want to be a corpse, either. He'd made up his mind, though, a few nights ago. He contacted Reis secretly, told him to lay off. He promised to come through with the goods. Reis had promised a fair shake with the law in return. Not more than five years, that was the deal. But Sarillo had wanted time, time to figure out a way to give us the evidence without Lane suspecting where it had come from. That was silly; Reis knew it. Any evidence about Lane's tax reports would have had to come from Sarillo. Reis became impatient, but Sarillo was insistent. So Reis had given him time, under orders from the Commissioner. Of course, it was only a matter of time before Lane found out what the score was. Every hour that Sarillo held out now was an hour closer to the slab for him. Reis knew that, too.

Reis knew it and I wondered about it. Sarillo had refused police protection, naturally, because that would have been like writing an open letter to Lane declaring his

intentions. Sarillo had assured Reis that Lane trusted his bookkeeper explicitly, that he did not want the police tailing him, either. But Reis had put me on Sarillo's tail, anyway. And now I wondered if he hadn't done it purposely. I wondered if he hadn't picked me for the job because he knew there was no saving Sarillo. A patsy, I thought. Me. Reis was out to get me, and maybe he figured this'd be the clincher. All right, maybe I was figuring too far, maybe I was dreaming up stuff because of my hatred for Reis. But I wouldn't have bet money against the possibility that I might be right.

"Stick close, but stay out of sight of Lane's boys," the Lieutenant had instructed. "And damn it, don't let anything happen to him!" Reis had drummed it into me: *Don't let anything happen to him.*

I had. I couldn't have done a better job of it. Sarillo was laying on the floor in front of me. Stone dead.

The chime sounded and I went over and opened the door. It was the ambulance boys. I nodded toward the body and the doc went over quickly, checking for life in Sarillo's body the way I just had.

Lieutenant Reis, squat and heavy-boned, stepped out of the elevator while I was still standing in the doorway. He was followed by Sargeant Quade, tall, thin, as good a cop as Reis any day. Quade posted a uniformed man in the hallway and trailed Reis into the apartment. I was under Reis' flaming stare from the instant he saw me. He shot me a look that had a throat slitting edge to it as he passed me in the doorway. I followed behind Quade as they went over to look at Sarillo.

The doc looked up at Reis. "This is for the coroner, Lieutenant."

"He died a few minutes ago," I said.

Reis' glare swung around to me. It seemed to be a signal for everybody else to stare at me. After a moment Reis said, "Let's have it, Bulick. What happened?"

The doc and the stretcher bearers started for the door, tactfully. Quade took his eyes from me and flushed a little. I could see that the only friend I had in the world was embarrassed by the spot I was in.

"Well?" Reis demanded.

"I was across the street, Lieutenant," I said. "I gave him about a minute after he came into the building, then I followed. I was just coming out of the elevator when I heard the shot. I let myself in with a skeleton key, and there he was, flat on his back with a bullet in his head."

Reis sucked in a breath, drawing his lips tight and glancing down at the .45 on the floor. "By the size of the tunnel in his skull, this must be the murder weapon."

"I think so, sir," I offered. "Everything is just the way it was when I came in. There's no other gun around. The lab boys ought to be able to . . ."

"Don't be a jackass," Reis shot at me. "Nobody's going to leave a gun around with prints on it."

"We could trace the serial number, sir."

"I know what we can trace, Bulick. I don't need your advice. Did anybody else hear the shot?"

"Yes, sir. There was a bunch of people in the hall awhile ago. A couple of them said they heard the shot."

"Did any of them see anybody enter or leave this apartment?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know. Just what the hell have you been doing here, Bulick?"

"Well, sir, you told me to watch the place, and . . ."

"You could have started asking questions while those people were standing around in the hall."

"They were all excited, Lieutenant," I tried to explain. "All talking at once. I didn't think . . ."

"You're telling me." He cast his eyes toward the open window. "Did you check the fire escape when you came in?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I saw the window open and I went over right away. But I didn't see anybody. It's only two flights down to . . ."

"I know how many flights it is, Bulick. You said Sarillo was alive for awhile. Did he say anything?"

"No, sir, he didn't. I asked him if he knew who shot him and he tried to speak, but he couldn't. He died right after that."

Reis whirled abruptly and went over to the window. He leaned out over the sill, looking down for a moment. When he pulled his head back in he said thoughtfully, "Well, whoever did it was either waiting for Sarillo in the room, or was out on the fire escape." He looked at the body. "The impact of a forty-five slug could have spun him around from almost any position in the room."

"That's what I've been thinking, sir," I said. "Whoever it was could have been sitting right outside on that fire escape, so he could make a fast getaway after he pegged his shot at Sarillo. Sarillo must have got it as soon as he snapped the light on. I figure . . ."

"Look, Bulick," Reis snapped, "when I want your opinion I'll ask for it."

"Well, I was just . . ."

"You can just button your lip." He walked up close to me and squared his eyes away on mine. "Bulick," he said, "you're a foul ball. You're a lousy cop. The lousiest. Always have been."

Of course, I'd expected it, but that didn't make me feel any better. You know what's coming, but when it's spit in your face it stings just as hard, no matter what the circumstance. "Now, wait a second, sir . . ."

"Wait, hell. I'm suspending you as of right now, without pay."

"What for?" I said angrily. I hadn't considered the *suspension*

without pay angle.

"Neglect of duty, for one thing."

I felt the hackles rise on my spine. I breathed anger into his face and stabbed a finger at his overstuffed chest. "You lousy son of a bitch! Who the hell . . .!"

Quade grabbed my shoulder. "Hold it, Frank," he said to me. "For your own good don't make it any worse."

"Insubordination!" Reis shouted viciously. "We'll tack that on, too!"

"Listen, you lousy . . .!" I started.

"You better get the hell out of here, Bulick," Reis barked, "or so help me I'll slap you in the cooler!"

That did it. I cocked my fist back, but Quade stepped in front of me quickly and grabbed my arm. "For God's sake, Frank, don't be a fool! Get out of here!" I hesitated, then grimaced and dropped my fist to my side. I nodded slowly, looking at Quade's understanding eyes now. "All right, Charley," I said. "I'll go." I flicked Charley a little smile as I turned around. I knew what he'd done was for my own good.

I glanced down at Sarillo briefly, then left as the lab boys came into the room.

I went home and broke the seal on a virgin bottle of bourbon. I finished most of it by three A.M., finally, staggered into bed and fell asleep with my clothes on. The sun glaring through the window woke me around mid-morning. My tongue felt like a pair of old socks, my head throbbed as though somebody had been pounding away on it with a battering ram. When I thought of a battering ram I remembered Reis and the suspension without pay and I reached for the bottle again. I finished the rest of it and that forced Reis out of my mind. I picked up the phone and called headquarters. I asked for Sergeant Quade. The phone clicked a few times and then his voice came on. "Sergeant Quade speaking." His voice sounded tired, ragged.

"You sound beat, Charley," I said.

"Frank?"

"That's right. Ex-detective Bulick."

"It might not be as bad as all that," he said sympathetically.

"Want to bet?"

He was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry about what happened with you and Reis last night, Frank."

"I'm not," I said.

"You shouldn't have blown your fuse."

"I didn't even get started. If it wasn't for you . . ."

"You've got a bad temper, Frank. You'd have made Sergeant a long time ago if you . . ."

"Nuts, Charley," I said, "With Reis around I wouldn't make Sergeant if I was on the force a hundred years." He didn't say anything and I went on. "What's new on Sarillo, Charley?"

"We checked out the .45."

"And?"

"It was Sarillo's own gun. He had a permit for it, since he carried large sums of money for Lane Enterprises."

"You mean suicide?" I asked incredulously.

"No. Sarillo was left-handed. Even if he did shoot himself in the left eye, the angle of the bullet was all wrong. We got the coroner's report and the report from ballistics. He was shot from only a few feet away. It's amazing the bullet didn't come out the other side of his skull at that range."

"Powder burns?" I asked.

"Yeah. We figure it must have been one of Lane's boys. Somebody who knew him well enough to get that close to him and then plug him with his own gun."

"How about an outside torpedo? Lane might have borrowed one from the syndicate's pool."

"Nah. A torpedo wouldn't have bothered grabbing Sarillo's gun. He'd have just blasted off with his own and left, probably with a silencer, at that."

I dwelled for a moment on what Quade had just said. His judgment was reliable. "Smart boy, Charley," I said. "I think you're right. Now if you can just tag Lane with this . . ."

"Yeah. *If.*"

"Haven't you got anything?"

"Just a dead man and his gun."

"No prints?"

"Like Reis said last night, nobody leaves a gun around with his prints on it. Everything was smudged, even Sarillo's, assuming his prints *were* on the gun." He sighed heavily. "We're stumped again, Frank."

"But you know it was one of Lane's boys," I said emphatically. "There's got to be *something* you can trace."

He sighed again. "Nothing, Frank. Not a damn thing." He paused for a few seconds, both of us mulling our own thoughts. "Frank?"

"Yeah?"

"You wouldn't be thinking of going into this on your own, would you?"

"Not a chance," I laughed. "What makes you ask?"

"I know you, boy. A Polock with a skull as thick as an Irishman's. You might be figuring you can straighten yourself with Reis if you can nail Lane on your own."

"Thanks for the compliment, but you got me all wrong this time, Charley."

"What are you going to do?"

"Start looking for a job, I guess." I laughed. "Maybe in South America."

"Aw, Frank," he said disappointedly. "Stay with it, boy. You've been on the force a long time. They've got to take that into consideration."

"*I'm* taking into consideration the idea of pounding a beat again. To be truthful, Charlie, the idea doesn't

appeal to me. Neither does the reduction in salary. Well, I'll be talking to you, Charley. Regards to the wife."

"Stay with it, Frank, will you?"

"Sure. Sure. I'll stay with it. So long, Charley."

"So long, boy."

I smoked a cigarette, cursed under my breath when I discovered there wasn't another bottle of bourbon. I showered and shaved, thinking about Morey Lane mostly now. Lane was a shrewd bastard, he wasn't top man for nothing. He knew how to protect his investments. He'd wised up that Sarillo was going to sing to save his own skin. Sarillo was gold when it came to arithmetic, but when it boiled down to Lane's own neck, gold was expendable. It was a neat trick, I thought, blasting a guy like Sarillo at a time when he was most popular with the police. I finished dressing, thinking briefly about what Charley Quade had said about my going after Lane on my own, and my denial of it. I looked at my shield and identification wallet on the bureau. It felt strange not to be putting it in my pocket. To most cops, their badge was a symbol of honor. I strapped on my shoulder holster, checked my snub-nosed .38, then stuffed it back into the leather.

I decided it was time to pay Morey Lane a visit.

It was late morning and the Club Indigo was closed, but I knew Lane would be there. I went around to the back door, rang the bell and waited. A small panel in the middle of the door slid aside and an eye showed itself briefly. Then the panel slid shut and the door opened. The big guy stepped aside as I walked inside. "And what can we do for the police department today?" he grinned.

"I want to see Lane, wise guy."

"Just a minute, sir," he mocked, "I'll see if he's in." I sucked in an angry breath while he lifted the receiver on a flush-mounted wall phone and pressed a small pearl button. "The cops," he said into the mouthpiece. Then he chuckled and said, "Yeah, Marty, it's Bulick." He hung up and his grin broadened as he bowed and swept his arm through the air in an exaggerated page-boy gesture. "Please enter, sir."

I felt like spitting in his eye, but I started walking down the corridor instead. There was a walnut door at the other end and it opened when I approached. Another mountain-sized toughie stood there, the recipient of the telephone message, Marty. He had a smirk on his face, neither of us saying anything as I walked into the plush office.

Lane was sitting behind a sprawling modern desk, large ledger books stacked on it, one of them opened before him. He had a fountain pen in his hand and he stopped writing and looked up at me. He was well dressed, conservatively, an

important-looking man with soft blue eyes and a robust face with quiet, friendly features. He looked more like the town minister than the head of a million dollar rackets empire.

"This is a pleasant surprise," Lane said calmly. "How are you, Bulick?"

"I want to see you alone," I said.

He smiled benevolently. "Marty's my friend, Bulick. You wouldn't want me to hurt his feelings would you?" It was his quiet way of saying, "Nobody sees me alone."

I turned my head a little and glanced at Marty. He was right behind me, by the door. I took in a deep breath. "Sarillo got it last night," I said to Lane.

He laid the pen down and sat back, clasping his hands in his lap. "I know. It's in the morning papers. Looks like I'll have to do my own bookkeeping for awhile." He smiled up at me. "You got here mighty fast, Bulick."

"The police department feels pretty bad about it," I said. "Especially Lieutenant Reis."

Lane pursed his lips "So do we, Bulick." He glanced over my shoulder. "Don't we, Marty?"

"Sure," Marty's voice said behind me.

I fastened my eyes on Lane. "They suspect it was one of your boys."

"They do?" he said feigning surprise.

"But they don't have a thing to go on," I told him. "Not a thing."

He grinned broadly. "Now that *is* too bad."

The preliminaries were over. I walked up to his desk, staring at him dead serious. "Twenty grand," I said.

The smile dropped from his face abruptly. "The deal was ten."

"I'm suspended from the force without pay. I need unemployment insurance now."

He looked up at me craftily. "That's your tough luck, Bulick." He opened a desk drawer and counted off ten packets of bills, then stuffed them in an envelope. "Don't four-flush on me, Bulick," he said, his voice harsh now, menacing.

For an instant I thought of Sarillo, the surprised expression on his face when I walked into his apartment with my gun in my fist and told him to hand over his .45, the knowing look when he saw me wrap my handkerchief around the butt of his gun, the trembling and the pleading when I pointed the muzzle at his head. I remembered the way he looked afterwards, sprawled on the floor, blood seeping from his eye, saturating the carpet. I thought about all that, what I'd done for money and I said, "Twenty-grand, or I sing." Lane's eyes widened and his mouth twisted furiously. "Burn me," I said, "and they'll know who did it. Knocking off a cop isn't like blasting a private citizen."

"You said you were suspended, you punk!"

I grinned. "There's another cop, Lane. His name is Sergeant Quade." Lane's eyes narrowed, knowingly. He knew the name Quade, all right. He knew Charley was a good cop, a straight cop, a relentless cop. He also knew Charley and I were good friends. I said, "Charlie'd get the guy who bumped me if it took him the rest of his life."

Lane stood, the envelope in his hand, his eyes hot, angry. "You haven't got the guts, Bulick," he said suddenly. "You haven't got the guts to sing before a grand jury. You haven't got the guts to breathe cyanide just to get me." He clenched his jaws and threw the envelope at me. It struck me in the face sharply, the money spilling out and scattering over the floor.

I swallowed hard, looking down at the money, the sweat suddenly bursting from my pores, Lane's words knifing through me, thudding in my brain. I pictured the gun under my shoulder, I felt it there like a dead weight, and I wondered why I'd taken it with me in the first place. Then abruptly, I knew why I'd taken it. I thought of Marty behind me, undoubtedly with a gun pointed at my back, waiting for me to make a move.

If I was fast, I calculated, I could get Lane.

I knew I was fast.

I'd get mine, sure, but I'd get Lane, and maybe that'd wipe the slate clean. I'd be a good cop, and maybe I'd make Sergeant at last —posthumously.

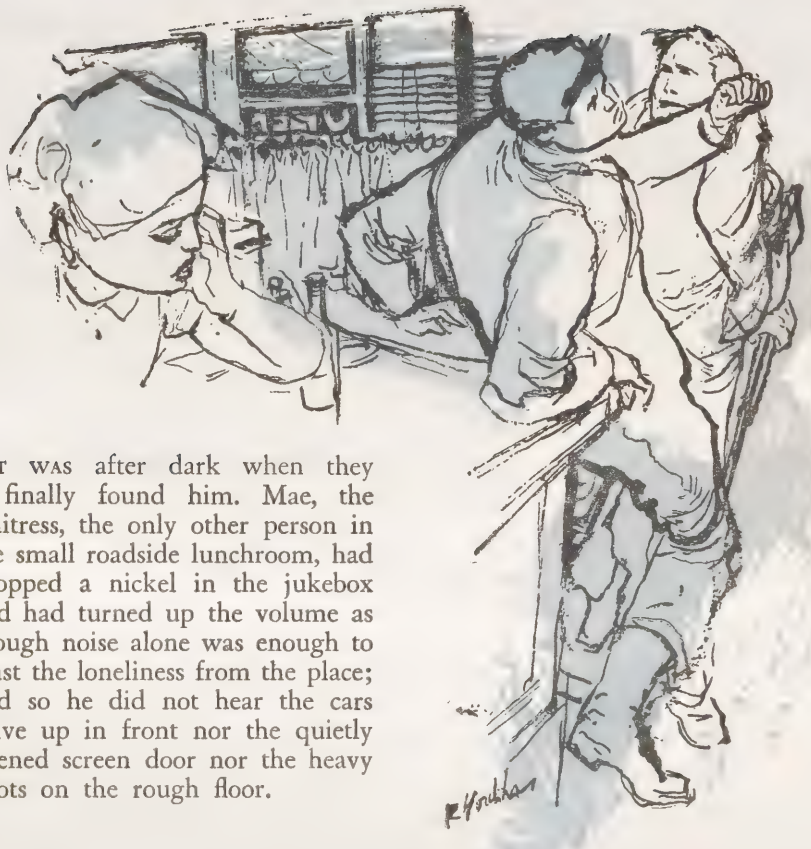
The thoughts burst through my mind. I thought about Charley, good ole Charley. He'd be proud of me. Then I thought about Reis . . . a grand jury . . . the gas chamber . . .

Then I thought about South America.

I got down on the floor, on my hands and knees, and started picking up the bills.

Time Out

It happened recently in Chicago. Witnesses told police three bandits wearing canvas masks emerged from a car and ran to the front door of the Bank of Elmwood Park. They hesitated a moment, then fled in disgust. On the door was a sign: "Closed on Wednesday."



IT WAS after dark when they finally found him. Mae, the waitress, the only other person in the small roadside lunchroom, had dropped a nickel in the jukebox and had turned up the volume as though noise alone was enough to blast the loneliness from the place; and so he did not hear the cars drive up in front nor the quietly opened screen door nor the heavy boots on the rough floor.

"Sorry, Mister..."

What Jess' boys did to the man with the soft pink face was wrong, dead wrong. Ask Mae — Mae knows.

BY C. L. SWEENEY, JR.

He was sitting with his back to them, a half eaten piece of pie and a cup of coffee on the counter in front of him. His feet, encased in cracked and stained paratrooper boots, were wrapped around and the toes hooked into the chrome legs of the stool so that you could see the places where the soles had worn through. His faded dungarees looked almost white against the red plastic seat and there was still a dark inverted V of perspiration across the back of his denim shirt. He was hungry and, more than that, he was tired. Dead tired. He had been moving since late afternoon, fast and steadily as only those driven by fear can go, keeping away from the roads, staying to the woods and the fields and the orchards until darkness came. Then, seeing the lights, smelling the food and coffee until it hurt, he had come in, had taken his chance and had lost.

Mae was standing behind the counter, facing the door. She was polishing a glass and chewing her gum in time to the music. She saw them first and she started to smile and make some smart remark because they were all old customers and she was glad for their company on this hot August night. She started to, and then she saw the hard lines of their mouths and the cold narrowed glint of their eyes and colder still, the blued steel of the rifles in their hands.

They were all men she knew; big, bluff, easy-going, good-natured farm men who stopped in on their way to and from town for a hamburger and a piece of pie and coffee. While they ate they would kid her about her bleached hair or they would tell her the latest joke they had picked up in town. She would pretend to be shocked, although she had always heard the joke before, and they would slap their thighs and roar with laughter. Sometimes when she passed they would reach out and touch one of her full breasts or pat her buttocks through the tight cotton uniform, as though she were some budding young farm girl instead of a twice-married woman of thirty-five, and she would slap at their hands and they would go off in gales of laughter again.

She liked them all, but she had never seen them like this before and she was frightened.

They came through the door and into the room, perhaps a dozen of them, saying nothing, the first of them forming a tight semi-circle, the rest crowding behind, rifles cradled in their arms, fingers stroking the triggers, ready. Ryerson was leading them. Jess Ryerson, not big but wiry and tough as a hickory sapling, darkly handsome, fast with a laugh and fast with his fists, a way with the men, a reputation with the women. Jess bossed old John Tinkham's farm, five or six miles up the road and one of the biggest and most prosperous in

upper New York State. Jess was always the leader. It was a part which was expected of him and which he played well.

Jess, without taking his eyes from the back of the man at the counter, shifted his rifle to his left hand and raised his right. The others stopped. There was only the blare of the jukebox. Then Jess took four steps forward, carefully, quietly, until he stood directly behind the figure.

Mae held the glass she had been polishing in midair, her whistling dying off in the middle of a note. Her eyes, wide with sudden alarm, raced back and forth between Jess and the stranger at the counter.

The man had felt a release of tension after the first ravenous gulps of pie and coffee. The friendly music and lights and food were like drugs on the tired ache of his mind and body. He watched Mae as she moved behind the counter, watched her absently, vacantly, without seeming to really see her at all.

All at once the jukebox stopped. The man, as though startled by the abrupt silence, looked up, his eyes leaping into focus.

The rifles in the room steadied.

The man saw Mae's white frozen face and her eyes staring over his shoulder and suddenly he understood and started to turn, coming to his feet in one motion, like a big cat; but Jess was on him, roughing him, using the length of the rifle in his left hand to pin him back against the counter.

They stood like that for a full half minute, testing each other, thigh to thigh, shoulder to shoulder, eye to eye, breathing heavily. Then Jess took a quick step back and his right hand lashed out, palm open. He hit the man full in the mouth, forehand, crack, backhand, crack, his heavy ring cutting cruelly into the full lips.

"You bastard," he said. "You raping, knifing bastard."

The guns converged, did not waver.

The man put his hand to his mouth and the blood began to trickle through his fingers. His eyes were wide with shock; not defiant but rather frightened and piteous, like those of a snared rabbit. When he faced you, you could see that he was young, perhaps twenty-five. He was big, too, but what you noticed most was his face, strangely soft and pink beneath the tousled black hair.

He stood there, making no sound, his hand over his shattered mouth, the blood running in a tiny rivulet down his wrist now.

"All right, boys," said Jess without looking at them, "take him."

They began to shuffle forward.

Suddenly Mae was around the counter, not thinking, not knowing why but some deep woman-instinct driving her to react against this brutality she did not understand. She grasped Jeff by the sleeve, pulling at him, thrusting her body be-

tween his and the man, the man with the soft pink face. "Don't do it, Jess," she said, looking up at him, pleading. "Don't let them do it."

The men stopped. They waited, watching Jess.

Jess took a deep breath and for the first time took his eyes from the man and looked at Mae. "He killed Bess Tinkham," he said. "He killed her in the barn this afternoon. We found her there, up in the loft, when she didn't come to supper." His words carried a vicious personal hate.

She gasped audibly, her rouge and lipstick almost garish on her pale face. She did not know Bess Tinkham, not really, but she had often seen her. Seen her riding by on the road outside in her blue convertible, driving like the wind, always laughing and gay with her light dress molded against her body and her hair flying back in a golden stream. She had heard stories about her, fragments picked up from man-talk at the tables; but then, there were always stories like that when a girl married a man thirty years older than herself.

"He killed Bess Tinkham," Jess was saying again. "He came by a month ago and John felt sorry for him and gave him a job. Now he's killed Bess." His eyes narrowed and went back to the man. "We came to get him."

Behind him there was a gruff rumble of assent.

Mae looked at the wall of faces and knew that it was no use, that she was only stalling, buying minutes with words, delaying, hoping. Neither did she know why she was doing it. The face, perhaps, or the blood running through the fingers, or the fear. She did not know. All she understood was that she must try. "Where's John, then?" she said. "It was his wife. Why isn't he here?"

"His heart again, Mae," one of the men said. "After they found her. The doctor's there now."

"I told him we'd take care of it for him," Jess said. "We're only out to do what he wanted done."

She looked at the men and several of them nodded, confirming what he had said. They began to shuffle their feet, nervous, impatient.

The hopelessness rose within her, stifling and choking, but she tried again. "It's not up to you," she said. "Call the Sheriff, let him take care of it. Let the law take care of it."

"We'll call the Sheriff," Jess said, "after we do what's to be done first."

She stared at him, not understanding.

"He didn't just kill her, Mae," he said. "I guess there's no reason you shouldn't know. All her clothes were torn off first. Naked. You know." He was having trouble controlling his voice. He cleared his throat. "After that he killed her. Not just killed her. Slashed her,

ripped her. No sense to it." He looked at the man and his voice hardened. "Get him," he said through his teeth. "Get the son-nova bitch."

Mae's body slumped in defeat and the men surged around her to get at the man against the counter. Two of them took his arms and twisted them behind him, pinning him between them.

"Search him," Jeff said. "Find the knife."

One of them stepped forward and ran his hands up and down the man's body, his arms, his legs. He turned the pockets out. There was an old billfold, a few coins, nothing more. The man stepped back. "It isn't here, Jess," he said.

"He must have thrown it away," Jess said. "It doesn't matter." He looked at the men. "All right," he said, "let's get it over with. Get him out of here." He exhaled sharply. "Cut him. Cut him good."

Suddenly, then, the man screamed. A peculiar, high-pitched scream that bubbled through his torn mouth, more animal than human. "No," he screamed. "No, I didn't do it." It was the first time he had spoken, made any noise, and it pierced the ears with its shrill horror. He fought against his captors, using his big body, kicking out at them, but they were too many for him and they ganged him and beat him down until he was quiet again.

Jess stepped in front of him. "One of the men saw you coming out of the barn," he said. "Then you ran. Why else would you run?"

The man had begun to cry now, quietly, big tears running down his soft round cheeks; and because his arms were held he could not wipe them away and so they ran down and mingled with the blood in his broken mouth.

"I was scared," he said in that peculiar shattered voice. "I found her like that up in the loft and I was scared. I was scared you'd think I did it."

"What were you doing up in the loft?" Jeff said. "You had no business up in the loft."

The blood, unrestrained by the man's hand now, was trickling down his chin and onto his blue denim shirt, making a growing blotch of darkish-red there. "She asked me to meet her," the man said. "She . . ." and that was all he said because Jeff's hand, not open this time but balled, caught him square in the face, spattering the men who held him. His knees buckled and but for them he would have gone down.

"You're a liar," Jeff almost shouted, his fist still closed, threatening. "A dirty goddam liar. She wouldn't go up there. She wouldn't go up there with you." His whole body was trembling.

Then he got hold of himself. "Get him out of here," he said. "Get it over with."

They half carried, half dragged him across the floor, kicking, writhing, screaming. Mae, still standing in the center of the floor, did not even look up. They carried him through the door and across the cinder drive and around to the back of the building where it was dark and away from the lights of the cars on the road.

"Get him down, get him down," several voices said, and they wrestled to put him off his feet. He was not screaming now but sobbing, deep wracking sobs, and he fought back, keeping his feet until someone hit him with a jack handle and sent him to his knees and then they had him on his back, pinning his arms and legs and body to the warm moist earth.

There was no strength left in him to fight, to resist them, but the sobbing continued and the blood running back in his throat made him cough and throw his head from side to side.

"Get them off," a man said impatiently. "Get them off." He had a short, wickedly-curved knife in his hand and was testing it on his thumb.

Someone reached down and loosened the belt and tugged at the faded dungarees.

"Bring a light," the man with the knife said. "How the hell can I work without a light."

They were all crowding around now, wanting to see, pushing and shoving.

Jess took a flashlight from one of them and thumbed the switch. He knelt and turned the beam down. He held it there for perhaps ten seconds. Then he snapped it off and stood up and began to walk away.

"Jesus," said the man with the knife. "Jesus Christ."

One of the men who had been closer than the rest, who had been pinning a leg, got to his feet and went over into the bushes and you could hear him being sick there.

Nobody spoke for a full minute. Only the sobbing continued. That and the chirp of the crickets and the heavy breathing of the men and the shrill whistle of the tree toads. Nothing else. Then one of them said, "A land mine." He was a young man and had been in Korea. "A land mine could do that."

Nobody answered him. They all looked at Jess. He took a deep breath. "I guess we made a mistake," he said. "I guess he couldn't have done it."

"We better call the Sheriff," somebody said.

"Sure," Jess said. "Sure."

They began to move slowly back to the cars in little groups, rifles dragging. Jess looked down at the man. He was lying as they had left him. Still sobbing. Jess stood there with his hands hanging limply at his sides and then, because there didn't seem to be anything he could do or say, he turned on his heel and followed the men.

They were already in the cars, waiting for him, and Mae was standing in the door when he came back into the lights. He walked up to her and said something and nodded his head toward the back of the building and pressed some bills in her hand. Then he got in one of the cars and the tires churned the cinder drive and the cars swung onto the road.

Mae watched their red tail lights disappear in the distance. Then she went back inside.

After a while she came out and went around the building. She found the huddled figure by the choked sobs still coming from it and with a wet towel began to gently wipe away the blood and the dirt from the face, the soft pink face.

"Come on inside," she said. "They're gone. We'll get you cleaned up. Something to eat."

He did not answer, but he had stopped crying.

"They were sorry," she told him, as though he were a little boy. "They left something for you."

He looked up at her. "In a minute," he said. "I'll come in a minute."

She patted his cheek. "All right," she said and stood up and went back inside. She would cook something for him. She thought he might like a steak. That would be nice. She would cut it up small for him, so that it wouldn't hurt his mouth. French fries too, maybe.

After she had gone he lay there for a moment, resting, thinking, looking up at the stars. His mouth hurt him, but he was still very hungry and he guessed that he could eat if he was careful. It would be good to be back in there with the smell of the food and the music. Too, he remembered Mae, remembered how her full body moved around inside the thin white uniform, remembered how if you half closed your eyes it was easy to pretend that the uniform was not there at all.

He sat up and straightened his shirt and dungarees and pushed his hair back from his face. It was funny. They could blow away your body but they never blow away your hungers. And it was funny, too, how other things gradually took over and compensated you for what you had lost. Things like having women want to mother and take care of you.

And then beyond that you began to find other compensations, other outlets, even for the loving. Even for that. He reached down and felt inside his boot and brought the knife out and pressed the button and watched the blade leap from the handle, not cold and sharp but warm and caressing. He laughed. Then he remembered Mae again, full and soft like the other one.

He got to his feet, remembering, a little surprised. He had not thought he would need a woman again so soon.

Melcarth had never even kissed a woman. Then he watched while Brusky took one in the garage.

Brusky's Fault

BY ROBERT PLATE

EVERY NIGHT the horror relived itself for Vincent Melcarth. It always began as a tiny square on the bedroom ceiling, like a television screen with figures too small to identify. But the screen grew inexorably. Whether he stared open-eyed or squeezed his eyelids shut until they ached, the screen was there, growing.

It grew until it spread across the whole ceiling, and then it became the entire world for him.

Watching, he saw himself once

again walking into Mac's Garage and toward the cluttered little office, on his monthly visit to straighten out Mac's books. It was late—he'd been busy at his own office that day—and the garage was deserted except for the new mechanic, Ray Brusky.

Brusky was weaving about, kicking at tires and cursing thickly to himself. He held a fifth of rye, almost empty.

"Have a shot, man," he said, extending the bottle to Melcarth, who shrank back and hurried into the office. Brusky roared with laughter.

As he shut the door, Melcarth peeked timidly through its small glass pane. The burly mechanic was draining the bottle. He smashed it against the concrete-block wall, and laughed again.

Perhaps he should have phoned then, Melcarth thought, but the phone was just outside the office, on the wall. He'd have to make the call in front of Brusky—a frightening risk. Besides, a man ought to mind his own business and keep out of trouble.

Melcarth felt he was expert at keeping out of trouble. Take women for instance. In the sixteen years since he had left high school, Melcarth had never dated a girl. He thought of girls, of course. But when he did, his stomach tightened into an uneasy ball, and he became painfully aware of his receding hairline and his receding chin, of his inexperience, of his inadequate store of banter and small talk.

What he liked and trusted was the emotional simplicity of rows of figures. The joys of addition and subtraction, in fact, enabled him to forget Brusky until he heard the woman's cry, shrill with anger and fear, and the sound of scuffling. He put down his pen and went to the door.

Brusky was trying to embrace a struggling woman. A slim blonde, she apparently had just driven the red convertible with the dented fender into the garage. Now, however, the garage doors were closed. Melcarth realized sickeningly that there was nobody else to rescue the woman. Drunken Brusky had probably forgotten his presence, thinking he was alone in the gloomily-lit garage, free to act as he pleased. Nobody outside could hear any noise from the big garage.

Melcarth hesitated. Brusky looked dangerous, with his red eyes and teeth bared like a tiger's.

The woman almost squirmed free, but Brusky's fingers hooked her dress, and as she lunged away the dress ripped off. Her flesh looked white and pure against the grime of the garage, with its oil-puddled cement floor.

Like a flower, Melcarth thought, trembling. A lily. Flesh of milk and snow and ivory. But alive. So *alive!*

The woman's eyes blazed as her nails tore red ribbons across Brusky's cheeks. Brusky cursed, then laughingly forced his mouth

against hers. She bit him. He pulled back and knocked her to the floor with a blow to her jaw.

Melcarth tried to moisten his lips with his tongue; it felt like a piece of dry towel. He stepped toward the phone, but Brusky saw him.

"Back!" Brusky yelled. He charged threateningly toward Melcarth, who quickly retreated into the office. Brusky speeded the retreat with a violent shove that spun him against the desk. From the clutter of papers strewn on the floor Melcarth heard the key click in the lock.

For a moment he lay there, savoring the thought that he was locked safely inside, and therefore had no obligation or opportunity to save the woman. He couldn't be expected to batter down the wooden door. It was too thick. The tiny pane of glass in it was too small for him to crawl through. So the rescue would have to wait for Mac, who was due to arrive soon to go over the books with him. He hoped Mac would be early. That poor woman . . .

A low moan and a muffled entreaty caused him to rise and go to the pane. He saw the woman die. The woman's body became still just as Mac entered, taking in the scene with one shocked glance.

Mac moved fast. Wrench in hand, he ran up quickly behind the exhausted Brusky and slugged him.

That should have been the end. Maybe he could have forgotten it all, if only they had let him alone. Instead, he had been forced to relive every detail time and again. First the cop, then the detectives, then more detectives at the stationhouse, then long sessions with the district attorney and, finally, the exhausting cross-examination at the trial. How many hundreds of times had he been forced to live through it? Now every last scrap of it was burnt deep into the core of his personality.

The attack was a part of his life now. It dominated him. All night long it haunted and terrified him.

But this morning there was new hope. At dawn, Ray Brusky had gone to his death in the electric chair. Racked with fatigue, Melcarth rose and dressed, hoping that with Brusky's death he would find peace.

At the diner where he always had breakfast, Sam the counterman served his prunes and coffee. "Brusky got it," he said.

Melcarth nodded, wanting to dismiss the subject, but Sam leaned across the counter confidentially. "I never said nothing before," Sam said. "Now it's all over, why not? Between you and me—" His voice lowered. "— I know what he did, but what did he *do?*"

Melcarth studied the steaming brown surface of the coffee, trying to see that; and nothing else.

"I'm just curious, that's all," Sam said. "I mean, reading the papers every day I know they couldn't

print a lot—but what couldn't they print? Get me? There wasn't much details."

Sam's greedy expectant face looked as lustful as Brusky's. Averting his eyes, Melcarth found himself in the mirror behind the counter. The darkness about his eyes, the lines of tension, the general fatigue and flight—would they never leave him?

They were still trying to make him live through it all again. He shoved the coffee from him, slopping it over the counter.

"What's wrong?" Sam said, as Melcarth rose and went to the door. "I didn't do nothing. Just a civil question, that's all. They call the guy a fiend, I wanna know why, is all."

Without uttering a word, Melcarth left the diner and descended into the subway. To avoid the details of the Brusky execution and case that filled most of the front pages, he bought a Times and tried to bury himself in its lengthy transcript of a senatorial hearing.

He couldn't get interested in it. His gaze strayed about the car, and focused on a pretty girl of about seventeen. She intently read her movie magazine, unaware that the fans of the subway car swirled her skirts up and about, revealing glimpses of her naked thighs.

Melcarth tried to look at the advertising cards. He tried to read the Times. He tried to study the faces of the other bored, unseeing passengers. But his gaze always returned to the flickering undulating skirts and the firm young body, and he kept thinking: "What would Brusky do?"

There was no way to forget Brusky, or the scene in the garage. It was getting so that every time he saw an attractive woman, that woman would suddenly become the victim, writhing and struggling.

The train had pulled into a station, the doors opened, and with the sudden gust of outside air the girl's skirts flared higher than ever. Aware at last, the girl pushed the skirt down, at the same time looking up and seeing Melcarth watching her.

Her clear innocent eyes held steady. Melcarth rose, blushing, and ducked out of the train just as the doors were closing.

He stood on the platform, watching the train disappear into the tunnel. "What's happening to me? I was never like this. I've got to get this whole Brusky thing out of my mind. It's bad, very bad."

He caught the next train and resolutely studied the tips of his shoes until he reached his station.

Hopefully, he went to work in his office. There had been a time when the whole world faded away and became nothing once he plunged into the details of his accounting business. There was no escape in the neat columns of figures today, no solace in the ledgers and the adding machine.

He found he was making mistakes. The image of the girl in the subway blotted out the figures. He felt himself wanting to do things to that girl, and the admission of this shocked him.

He tried hard. But by noon he admitted failure. All the work would have to be done over again, and his shirt was wet from the efforts he had made.

Exercise was the answer, he thought. His emotions were all churned up, and his brain was tired, and the only thing that would help was exercise.

He took the afternoon off and went to the park to walk. He walked grimly through the zoo, past the lake, along miles of winding paths until his feet were hot and swollen. Once he paused to get a hot dog and some ice cream, but two girls in tight sweaters came along and he had to walk off.

How many hours he walked he did not know, but finally he could go no further. He stretched out on a grassy patch surrounded by thick bushes, and fell asleep.

He awoke just as twilight was giving way to night. His body was stiff and aching, and his mind was full of half-remembered frightening dreams.

He sat up, wondering at the pounding in his chest, the rising exultation that was firing his body. "Like a hunter," he thought, looking intently about him, noting the dark shapes of the shrubs, and the more distant moving shapes of people, "That's how I feel."

The darkness retreated as he lit a cigarette. A mica-flecked rock glittered beside him, and he picked it up as he rose. It fit neatly into his pocket.

The odd excitement persisted as he sauntered along the darkening paths, past couples, seeking a lone woman.

He was conscious of an immense relief, as if he had made a great decision while he was sleeping, as if he would no longer be haunted by the Brusky attack because he had given in to the passions it had stirred.

He soon found what he wanted: a young woman clicking on high heels across the park. She walked briskly; perhaps she had an appointment to keep at the other side of the park.

Melcarth followed her, slowly reducing the distance between them. Almost with joy, he felt the resolution growing within him. He almost laughed. He, who hadn't dared to kiss a girl since those school-day parties so long ago, he was going to master a woman. He could do anything Brusky could, and more, because after all Brusky lacked the imagination that he could bring to the job.

He was sure of his imagination. The sleepless nights of the past weeks had made him very sure.

The girl had a good figure, slim

legs and a lithe, loose motion as she swung along. It would be good to possess her.

At this hour there weren't many people in the park, but Melcarth fidgeted as they neared the other side of the park without the right opportunity presented itself. Suddenly, it seemed that this woman, whose face he had never seen, was the one woman in all the world he must have.

And then, the chance came.

The path dipped through a bush-shrouded vale, and as the girl descended into it, Melcarth saw it was completely deserted.

Tugging the stone from his pocket, he rushed forward and seized the girl's arm. Startled, she tried to pull herself free. He clubbed at her head until she fell to the ground, blood trickling from her temple. He kneeled beside her, afire, clutching at her dress, delighting in the buzzing rip of silk and nylon. His hands shook; he gurgled like a baby.

A sound made him look up. The vale hadn't been deserted after all! Only ten feet away, half-hidden by a thick bush, stood a white-faced boy of about fourteen. He must have been there all the time, watching.

The boy stood frozen. Only his dark eyes moved, dilating in alarm as Melcarth, shocked, arose and took a step toward him. "Quiet," Melcarth said. "Don't yell. Go away." The boy whimpered. Melcarth felt his wild dream crumble about him. "Go," he said frantically. "Forget it. You must forget it."

The boy looked at the white body on the grass. The girl moved a leg and moaned.

"It's not my fault," Melcarth said. "It's Brusky's."

The thin, pimply boy shuddered, and licked his lips. With a great effort, he looked away from the woman.

Trying to placate the boy, Melcarth took another step forward. Abruptly the boy panicked. Shrinking back, he screamed, "Help! Police!"

No longer the hunter, Melcarth turned and ran like a rabbit. Ignoring the curious stares of homeward-bound mothers pushing their baby carriages, he raced down the park path toward the lake. Behind him, he heard the pimply-faced kid screaming.

"It's all Brusky's fault," he thought bitterly. After all, he had never even kissed a girl or been bothered much by sex—until that fiend Brusky had wrecked everything.

"Stop!"

That commanding bellow couldn't be the kid's. Glancing back, Melcarth saw a mounted cop charging off the bridle path. The boy ran after the horse, gesturing wildly in Melcarth's direction. The setting sun glinted on the cop's drawn revolver.

Melcarth sprinted desperately. Just ahead was a small arched wooden bridge over an arm of the lake. Beyond that, along the shore of the lake, a thick woods offered the hope of his shaking off the cop.

His feet drummed hollowly on the planked bridge. His weak lungs ached from the effort. Tears stung his eyes.

If only he hadn't seen Brusky!

If he had never seen Brusky he could still be leading his neat little harmless little life. But Brusky was a link connecting him to a hideous chain that reached back through the ages.

Gasping, weeping, he ran up the clean slope of a great glacial boulder that slanted down to the lake. Ahead was the woods. He thought of the lustrous wet eyes of the boy who had watched him, of the way the boy had gaped at the woman. Once the unsuspected demons were awakened,—as Brusky had awakened his, and as he in turn had awakened the boy's—there was no rest. Would that boy sleep tonight? If he did he would writhe with the same dreams that had tormented Melcarth.

He heard the loud beat of the hooves on the bridge, and another cry to halt. He was just short of the woods when he heard the shot. The impact knocked him forward. On his knees, he clutched a sapling and tried to haul himself from the rock into the underbrush. But the hole in his chest burned, his grip weakened, and the sapling sprang from his hand.

He began to roll over and over down the sloping rock. With the world spinning dizzily about him, he thought once more of the day in the garage, and then of the white skin of the girl in the park, and then again of the wet eyes of the pimply boy, the boy who would writhe tonight.

Then he no longed cared about anything. His body splashed into the shallow water and lay still, face down in the muck.

Used Car Dept.

Marjorie Johnstone, of Sydney, Australia, reported the theft of her car to police back in 1940. Sixteen years later detectives located the vehicle. Records disclosed that the car had changed hands 12 times since the theft. After recovery of the car, it took officers three days to locate Miss Johnstone.

Who did this sinful thing to Agatha? Raymond wouldn't tell—he was just like one of the family.

The Secret

BY
STUART FRIEDMAN

RAYMOND WAS wearing his Sunday suit because it was Sunday and sitting in the easy chair in his own room eating chocolate cake and drinking milk before bedtime and thinking how everything had turned out good, after all, which was how things always did turn out when you came right down to it.

It used to be he had bad habits like the wine-drinking habit and the cigarette-smoking habit and

sinful-thinking habit, and he did not work hard and mind what he was told and everything would just seem to get him nervous. It used to sometimes look like he was not going to make good. But he had made good.

He worked hard and minded what he was told and got a lot of fresh air and all the food he could eat and all the milk he could drink and his own private room with curtains on the window and two pictures and a table and a bureau and two chairs and a looking glass and a heap of a bed and a free radio and Mr. Kettrick gave him fifty dollars every month so he could buy clothes and see movies and basketball games and buy all the brand new comic books he wanted. Things did not get him nervous here on the farm, and Mrs. Kettrick, who was Mr. Kettrick's wife, told him he was one of the family, and Agatha Kettrick who was Mr. Kettrick's and Mrs. Kettrick's young daughter had had a surprise party for his birthday when he was forty years old, and he had got a lot of presents—a necktie and three Sunday handkerchiefs and a scarf. What Raymond wished more than anything in the world was that his name was Kettrick, too.

Raymond took a couple of swallows of milk and filled up his glass from the pitcher and drank some more. There was one thing about him, he thought, and that was that he sure did like milk, and most of all he liked milk just before bedtime so he could sleep good and solid and be able to do his full day's work and keep on making good so Mr. Kettrick would be proud of him. He took another big bite of the chocolate cake and started to chew it, slow and easy, tasting all of the different flavors of the dough and the walnuts cracked up in it and the thick fudge icing.

When he was chewing he was happy and did his best thinking, and it was like Mr. Kettrick's cows who were chewing all the time and did not get nervous, and it was like Mrs. Kettrick's chickens who moved their heads all the time when they walked. Raymond guessed if your head moved from walking or chewing it kept the blood turned up toward your head so you could do your best thinking. Maybe if he could start to chew tobacco. . . . He frowned and shook his head. The tobacco-chewing habit was not a clean habit and Mrs. Kettrick would not allow him to have it. But maybe he could do like Agatha Kettrick did sometimes and chew chewing gum. The first thing tomorrow morning after the morning milking he would try to be sure not to forget to ask Mr. Kettrick if it would be all right to take up the chewing-gum habit.

He heard the quick clickety-click of Agatha coming up the stairs in her first pair of high-

heeled shoes. Raymond hurried up and licked his gooey fingers clean and picked up the fork that she had put on the plate for him to eat his cake with. He could tell by her step that she was not having a slow, sad mood, so she either felt frisky or else she had her spunk up. Raymond waited as she came along the hall and got a little nervous because she might be mad and start hitting him. Agatha never had got her spunk up at him, but he thought about it a lot of times how she might take a notion to beat him up and get him down and pull his ears. She was little and skinny and only a girl of thirteen years of age and not big and strong like him, but if she took the notion to do that to him she would just go ahead and do it, and it made Raymond nervous to think about that.

She rapped shave-and-a-haircut on his door and at the same time opened it and stepped in part way.

"Hi, Raymond. Are you enjoying your cake?" she said in her teasy little voice.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered prompt and smiled back when she smiled. She had on a fat, whooshy, shiny dark green skirt and butter colored sweater and a jingle jangle of bracelets and sparkly swinging earrings and her cinnamon colored hair was passed through a napkin ring on the top back of her head and dropped in back like a horse tail and her face was round and clean and she had alive eyes that could be tender like a new calf's and she smelled good.

Suddenly, Raymond did not know if he ought to stand up, because even if she was just in school she had started to grow little titties on her chest and that made her a lady instead of a little girl. He got a little nervous and wriggled and started to get up, but she cried:

"What are you doing, Raymond? You don't have to get up. Don't let me bother you. I just looked in to see if you wanted any more cake or milk. H'm?"

"Oh, no. No ma'am. This will be plenty when I finish this. It is sure good cake."

"Better than Mama makes?" she said, teasy.

Agatha herself had made the cake, but if he would say it was best, and Mrs. Kettrick heard what he said. . . . He wet his lips and frowned and did not know what to say. His eye got caught by her high-heeled shoe. She sure did have pretty legs, like girls in a bathing suit in the pictures. Then he thought that was sinful thinking and looked up higher at her skirt where her stomach was, and he stared at that place while she said in a laughy way:

"You don't have to answer that. I was just teasing."

"Yes, ma'am." He tried to think what it was he didn't have to answer, but when he was not chewing he did not do his best think-

ing. She was skinny under the fat skirt, but her stomach was swole out big as a melon. It was funny.

"You just quit that ma'am, Raymond. I'm Agatha and you know it very well."

He looked up and her face was so pretty to look at that a warm feeling went through his chest and he tried to think of something that he could do for her, and then it came to him.

"Agatha, I used to go to school and what I was the star pupil in was arithmetic. I could do multiplication tables, every one of them perfect clean through the sixes, and if you need any help studying arithmetic, you just come to me."

"Oh, Raymond, you're just a doll. Thank you very much. What I'm having trouble with is two times two."

"Two times two is four."

"Wonderful. Whew!" She fanned her face. "Now I'm relieved. If you hadn't helped me I just don't know what. I've got to run, now. Bye bye."

When she was gone, Raymond sat and ate up the rest of his cake and cleaned up all the crumbs from the plate and from his Sunday suit and ate them, and drank off the last drop of his milk. It was fifteen minutes till nine and time to wind the clock and set it. He had already been to the outside privy and had washed in the inside bathroom, and all he had to do was take off his clothes and hang them up neat and lay out his work clothes and turn out the light, and get in bed and go to sleep.

He lay in bed in the dark, but something had got him nervous and he did not sleep. He heard Agatha go downstairs, then come upstairs and go in her room, then down to the bathroom, then the toilet flushing, then the washing bowl water running. She did not come out for a long time. He thought she was washing her teeth and hands and face and putting on different kinds of salves and creams for ladies, like he had seen in the medicine chest. One time he had known a girl that had little titties and had wanted them to be big and so she put some kind of cream on them and rubbed them and they would look shiny and polished and he thought maybe Agatha was putting cream on herself that way. He turned over and tried to sleep, but he was still nervous and he did not know why. He heard Agatha come out of the bathroom and go in her room across the hall. He listened close when she shut the door and heard the clicky sound of her putting on the chain lock. Mr. Kettrick had got a chain lock for her door so if a thief came in the house to steal Agatha's watch and gold school pin and bracelets he could not do it. That was why Mr. Kettrick put the chain lock on Agatha's door.

Raymond got to worrying if he

did not get to sleep quick, he would not have his full eight hours of sleep by the time it was time to get up and work. But he could not sleep. There was a tiny thump thump sound of Agatha walking around in her room, maybe in her bare feet, which she put red toenail polish on. And then he heard the snick of her light switch and her footsteps going to bed. He thought about her getting into bed, and then he remembered what had made him nervous. It was how fat her lower stomach was, like she had a melon under her skirt and he felt scared and wished it was not dark. If Mr. Kettrick would only let him sleep with the light on he could sleep.

But he couldn't sleep. All of a sudden the sinful-thinking habit came back on him. He did not know why, but there it was back on him. He had gone to church today and had done right all day, but there it was back on him. He got so nervous he just did not know what to do because Mr. Kettrick told him he could not get the bed dirty, but was to go down to the barn when the habit came on him. But it was too cold to get up and dress and go down to the barn. Then he thought maybe he could do it without anybody knowing, but right that minute he heard Mr. Kettrick coming up the stairs. Raymond waited, very nervous. He heard Mr. Kettrick try Agatha's door, and Agatha called out in a sleepy little voice who was it and Mr. Kettrick saying in the special soft voice he used on Agatha that it was just Daddy and good night and sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite. Then Mr. Kettrick opened Raymond's door and Raymond shut his eyes and made a snory sound and the light went on a minute, then went off. Raymond stopped being nervous and having bad thoughts that Mr. Kettrick wouldn't like and he went to sleep.

Raymond heard the tick that sounded just before the alarm went off and he turned off the alarm and got up quick before he would fall back to sleep. Mr. Kettrick did not like a hired man lying around like a perfumed woman past five o'clock. He dressed and pretty soon he heard Mr. Kettrick go down to shake the furnace. Raymond went down and outside and walked down to the cowbarn, and went up into the silo and threw down feed, all by himself, and pretty soon the gasoline engine that ran the milking machines was chuffing away and Mr. Kettrick yelled up that was enough silage. Raymond climbed down and started carrying silage to the cows in the stanchions. Then he helped give them their bran and soybean meal and salt and brought in the clean cans the creamery truck had left. Raymond hand-milked the raunchy little Jersey who would not hold still for the machine, and helped with the

stripping after the machines were done. Mr. Kettrick said Raymond had a better way with cows than any hired man he ever had had and never gave a one of them a sore teat from wrong squeezing.

Going up to the house for breakfast, Raymond walked just like Mr. Kettrick with a long stride and a strong proud look on his face. They washed in the kitchen that smelled good of cereal and eggs and frying ham and potatoes. While Mrs. Kettrick was setting the bowls and platters on the big table, Mr. Kettrick went in the sitting room and switched on the radio for the farm reports, then came standing in the doorway looking at Agatha's empty chair. Raymond hoped she would not be sick again and not be able to eat breakfast like she had been every day the last week, because a gloomy feeling came over everything and Mr. Kettrick would not be in a jokey mood.

Mrs. Kettrick looked at Raymond and said: "Don't just stand, dear. There's nothing for you to do. Sit down at your place."

Mr. Kettrick went and shut off the radio when he heard Agatha open her door. She swung sluffing in houseslippers along the hall upstairs, and Raymond got nervous because Mr. Kettrick and Mrs. Kettrick both stopped moving and were listening. Agatha went in the bathroom. Then the sound came, like it had been every morning the past week. A gagging sound from Agatha's throat. She kept doing it, like throwing up and it made Raymond very nervous and he saw Mr. Kettrick and Mrs. Kettrick look at each other a long time like they were talking a silent, secret language and Mr. Kettrick's long, wide leather-looking face turned sort of gray, and he formed his lips like to say something, but nothing came out. He stomped over to his chair and sat down hard and opened the Bible quick and Mrs. Kettrick scooted onto her chair and bowed her head and Raymond bowed his. Mr. Kettrick read from the Bible, but it was not like his voice, and it scared Raymond. Then the Bible slapped shut and Mr. Kettrick said some more and Amen.

He looked at Raymond and said: "Aren't you hungry, Raymond? Ella, Raymond is not hungry, so we will just give his breakfast to the pigs." Mr. Kettrick said the same thing lots of times for a joke, only this time it did not really sound funny and Raymond could not laugh very hard. Raymond wished Agatha would be well and come down so everybody would feel good again, and talk and make jokes instead of just eating and eating without saying anything.

Then finally she did come down, with her little shoulders all slumpy and her mouth down at the corners. She had on her school

clothes, a blouse and sweater coat and skirt and saddle shoes and she said:

"Mama, I can't hardly fasten my skirt. Will you let it out?"

Raymond looked at her lower stomach, and in her school skirt it stuck out more than ever.

"There's not time before the school bus."

Raymond jumped like he was shot because Mr. Kettrick smashed his fist down on the table bouncing all the dishes.

"She's not going to school today. She's sick."

"Oh," Agatha wailed. "I've *got* to go to school. I've just *got* to."

"Eat. You're sick. You'll stay home."

"But, Daddy . . ."

"Eat."

"I'm not hungry. I just want some black coffee."

"Hurry up, Raymond, and get down and turn the cows out and start cleaning the barn . . ."

"Can't I have no more milk, Mr. Kettrick, and some of that leftover pie?"

"Drink up. Carry the pie with you. Ella, wrap it up for him to carry. Get your coat on, Raymond."

Raymond got up and went for his sheepskin coat and put it on. "Can't I go first back to the . . ." He did not want to say privy in front of a lady, and he didn't know what to do because that's where he always did go first, and if he had to go down to the barn first when he always did it the other way it would make him nervous.

"Yes. Yes. You can go back there first. Now go on."

There was a "shoo" in Mr. Kettrick's voice and Raymond hurried out. When he came back, he came into the kitchen because he had forgot his pie. And he wished he had never stopped back inside. They did not see him because they were in the sitting room.

"You read the letter from Jim's wife last week, Agatha," Mrs. Kettrick said. "And you have the exact same symptoms she has. And *she* is going to have a baby."

"I don't care what that dumb thing has."

"That's shameful jealous talk, Agatha. Never mind. The point is, your stomach is swollen, and you're having the morning sickness . . . just like her. As if I didn't know the symptoms myself after five children. You didn't have your last period, either, did you?"

"I did. I DID!" Agatha yelled.

"Agatha. Look in my eyes and say that."

There was a long silence and Raymond got nervous waiting and he wanted to go back outside, but if he would move he was scared they would hear him.

"I tell you I didn't do anything bad. I didn't. I've been kissed. But I'm cool, just clinch and break clean, no B Pix, no heave-ho. I gave my sacred promise to Jim the

very night before he got married. I promised Jim right in this room that I would not let a thing happen that shouldn't. I'd rather be *dead* than break my sacred promise to my own *brother*."

Raymond nodded and thought how Agatha never would break her sacred promise to Jim. Jim had got married just before Raymond came to work for Mr. Kettrick. Agatha got in sad moods because Jim had gone off and left her and she said that she would marry Jim herself if she was not his sister. Agatha liked Jim.

Mrs. Kettrick said: "You missed your period."

Agatha started in to cry like her little heart had broke and Raymond snuffed his nose and the corners of his eyes burned and he felt a sad feeling in his chest for Agatha.

"Yes," Agatha said. "I didn't have it. I've been so scared I could die . . . oh-oh-oooooooo" she cried. "I wasn't going to school. I was going to run away . . ."

"Agatha," Mr. Kettrick said. "Who did it?"

"Nobody, Daddy. I swear . . ." she stopped to cry some more. "I SWEAR. How could it happen? It couldn't . . ."

"Your Daddy would never turn his back on you in trouble, honey," Mr. Kettrick said. "Don't be scared to say the truth."

Agatha let out a choky, crying sound and came running in the kitchen, her face all wet and red and her eyes shiny wide and she did not even see Raymond as she picked up the Bible and went back in the sitting room.

"I swear on the Bible, Daddy. I swear my solemn sacred oath on the Bible. I didn't do anything. I didn't do a thing to have a baby and I don't know why I'm going to have one. I'll kill myself."

"Tush," Mrs. Kettrick said and laughed. "Come along. Let's go upstairs and wash your face. Then we'll go over to the doctor's . . . and you're not to think silly things like that . . . why, you talk like your folks would turn you out."

Raymond heard them going upstairs, and he couldn't make himself make a sound because Mr. Kettrick was sitting right in the sitting room not making a sound and would hear. Then Mrs. Kettrick came back down in the sitting room.

"George, I believe her."

"No. She's scared and lying, and trying to protect the boy."

"I know my children, George. And I know that my Agatha is not lying."

"Why, God damn it, Ella, talk sense. She's pregnant."

"Then it happened when she was asleep."

"Ahhh!" Mr. Kettrick made a snorting sound. "And not wake up? A young girl like that. A virgin girl. Talk sense. Nature put a mighty tough wall up to block the

passage in innocent girls. She couldn't of slept through a breaking of her maidenhead."

"She didn't have a maidenhead, George."

"What are you saying?"

"She didn't. When she was ten it was broken. Remember when she fell off the tractor and was laid up in bed?"

"Is that a fact, Ella?"

"I said it. And I say it wouldn't be impossible for her to be attacked while she was sleeping."

"I put on that chainlock. And there's never the night I don't check it to see she hasn't forgot it . . ."

"Do you remember that first week after Jim got married? It was hot every night."

"Oh, my God!"

"Remember the night you heard her having a bad dream . . . ?"

"Good God, yes I do remember. She's opened her door to get some air through. I went in. She was whimpering and half-asleep. I sat down and patted her and she said she'd had a bad dream."

"That's what we thought it was. A dream."

"It never came to me that—"

"And the timing is exactly right. It's while Jim was on his honeymoon."

"Get her to the doctor. I'm going down to the barn."

Raymond stepped back quick and opened the door to the porch and just then Mr. Kettrick was in the doorway staring at him.

"I just come in this second," Raymond said, "to get my pie on the way to the barn."

"You were a long time back there." Mr. Kettrick stood and stared at him, not moving, just staring. Then Mr. Kettrick looked down at a shiny little puddle in the middle of the floor. Raymond knew there must have been a little snow on his boots that had melted off while he stood there. Mr. Kettrick walked into the kitchen and stood right over the puddle and looked at it and then at Raymond. Raymond saw Mr. Kettrick's jaw muscles clench and suddenly Raymond could not breathe. Mr. Kettrick looked up at his face and he smiled.

"Well, I guess you didn't take any longer back there than you had to. Go on and take your pie, and go to the barn."

It was already daylight, but things felt dark when Raymond walked down the lane to the barn. He held the slab of pie, careful, but he just could not take a bite of it, because back of him, maybe a stone's throw, he could hear the crunch crunch of Mr. Kettrick's boots on the snow. Crunch . . . crunch . . . crunch . . . coming steady and strong back of him. Raymond wanted to look around but his neck seemed locked. He did not want to look at Mr. Kettrick. Mr. Kettrick knew Raymond had been standing in the kitchen

and had not told the truth about just coming in the house. But instead of scolding him for telling a story Mr. Kettrick had smiled and it made him scared.

The minute he got inside the barn, he began to eat the pie as fast as he could do it. When Mr. Kettrick came in Raymond had the pie all in his mouth, so both of his cheeks were bulged out. Mr. Kettrick snapped on the light and looked at Raymond and pinned Raymond's eyes to his. Raymond stood trying to chew, but wasn't able to, while Mr. Kettrick was looking at him. Raymond could see a lot of thinking going on. That made him nervous and he tried to get his eyes away from Mr. Kettrick's, but he couldn't. His hands started to shake and he thought if he had some wine, just this one time again, that was what he would like to have, but Mr. Kettrick did not allow the wine-drinking habit. Raymond wanted to say something and ask Mr. Kettrick if anything was wrong and why wasn't he moving or saying something. Suddenly, Raymond's voice was out of his mouth:

"I never done it. I never. Mr. Kettrick, I never. She is like my own little sister and I help her with arithmetic, all the multiplication tables clean through six, one times one is one one times two is two one times three is three . . ."

"What are you nervous about?"

"Because I didn't. I would take the Bible, too, and swear my sacred honor, too, and what I would like to take up is the chewing-gum habit. Can I, Mr. Kettrick?"

"Sure. Now, let's get to work. I know you are a good boy, Raymond, and would never hurt Agatha or tell a story to me. Let's get to work. I know you will always tell me the truth."

"Yes sir, Mr. Kettrick."

"And you're not a low, sneaking filthy animal who has to be wiped off the face of the earth. Let's get to work."

Raymond got to work.

He worked all day, good. At dinner there was just leftovers because Mrs. Kettrick and Agatha had gone in the car to the doctor. At supper he did not see Agatha, and Mrs. Kettrick was not hungry. But he ate good and did not look at Mr. Kettrick. After supper he went to the privy and then went to his room. The light was on in Agatha's room, but he did not hear her. At eight-thirty he did not go down to get a sweet and his milk. But after a while Mr. Kettrick opened his door and looked at him.

"How come you don't want something before bedtime, Raymond?"

"Mr. Kettrick, I just don't know why."

"Don't you?"

"No, sir."

"It's because there's a poison lie in you, Raymond, isn't there?"

"I was in the kitchen before and listened and heard."

"Fine. That's a little part of the truth. What's the rest, Raymond?" Mr. Kettrick came in and shut the door back of him and stood against it, not smiling. "Have you done any sinful thinking?"

"No." Raymond looked away. He looked back. "Some."

"Ever about Agatha?" His voice got hoarse and his eyes were mean, and Raymond was scared to say.

"No."

Mr. Kettrick went out and downstairs and Raymond sat feeling nervous, and then Mr. Ketrick was coming back up. He came in the room with a wedge of cake and milk. He put it down by Raymond and then sat down on the other chair and watched.

"Eat," Mr. Kettrick said, real soft. And he smiled, but it was not a right smile. There was a loud rumbling in Raymond's stomach. He picked up the cake, but his throat was all dry and he knew he would not be able to swallow and he thought maybe some milk would wet his throat and he drank some. It came back up all over his overalls. He looked quick and scared at Mr. Kettrick and mopped his overalls clean with his bandana. Mr. Kettrick stood up, smiling, and went to the door.

"Well, goodnight, Raymond," he said. "Sleep tight."

Only Raymond could not sleep tight. He could not sleep any at all. He heard Mr. Kettrick in the hall walking up and down, slow and soft. Then Mr. Kettrick went down the stairs and out of the house. Raymond got to sleep, and then suddenly he was awake. It was the sound that made him wake up.

The bull bellowing. He could hear him clear from the barn, because the bull was mad. And what always got the bull mad was when he was put in the short pen.

Mr. Kettrick had put the bull in the short pen to make him mad. And Mr. Kettrick would put Raymond in there with the bull.

Raymond knew what he had to do and that was to ask Agatha to help him. He got up fast and put on his overcoat so he would be covered proper. He opened his door careful, and listened and he did not hear anything, just from the barn the bull bellowing. He would knock soft on Agatha's door and wake her up and tell her to tell Mr. Kettrick who really did it to her, or else Mr. Kettrick would think it was him.

The hall was dark and shivering cold and Raymond squinched his eyes, looking up toward the front bedroom, thinking for a minute that somebody was standing up there like part of the black shadows. He listened and there was no moving or breathing and he guessed it was nobody up there. He knocked on Agatha's door. It sounded terrible loud. He did not

hear Agatha wake up. He looked up toward the front bedroom, then knocked again.

"Who is it?" Agatha called. Raymond did not say anything, but waited and she came thumping in her bare feet that she put toenail polish on. He shivered and thought he saw something move up in the black shadow by the front bedroom. "Who is it?" Agatha said, close to the door. She opened it on the chainlock.

"Daddy," Raymond whispered.

"No it is not," Agatha whispered. "Raymond, you get right back in your room."

"Agatha, please leave me talk to you. Please. You got to say who really done it to you, Agatha. Your daddy will think it was me that did it bad to you, Agatha. He'll put me in with the bull."

"I can't tell him."

"You got to." Raymond heard his voice come out aloud almost sobbing. He got down on his knees at the part-open door and tried to reach his hand in to touch Agatha, but she shut it hard on his wrist. "Ouch! Oh! I never meant anything bad, Agatha. Can't you see me on my knees begging. Please, Agatha, or he'll kill me."

"No he won't. Now go away."

"Please!"

"I can't tell him. It happened when I was asleep. I know who, but I can't tell."

Suddenly, the hall light was snapped on and there was Mr. Kettrick standing with his shotgun looking at Raymond on his knees in front of Agatha's door.

Mr. Kettrick's face looked like Jehovah standing high with wrath and he said, "Raymond, get dressed. There is something down there bothering the bull. We will have to go and see about it."

"No." Raymond put his hands together like praying at church. "No. Please don't put me in there with him."

Mr. Kettrick walked close to him and put the end of the double-barrel 12 gauge shotgun by his head and said:

"Get dressed. And, Agatha, shut your door."

But she never. She opened it and ran out in her nightie crying. "Daddy, don't hurt him. It wasn't him. Don't. Don't."

"Then, who was it?"

"I can't in front of him."

"In your room, Raymond."

Raymond got into his room fast as he could and stood in there breathing hard and scared. He heard that bull a-bellowing, and then closer the bellowing of Mr. Kettrick.

He heard a slap and Agatha started bawling. "It was, it was, it WAS." Agatha said. "The night before he got married Jim came in and I was asleep, and partly awake. *It was* my brother. It was—"

There was another slap, and a big commotion and Mrs. Kettrick coming down the hall, and a lot of

talking and yelling, then they all went in Agatha's room and slammed the door.

It grew quiet, only murmuring. Raymond sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. Now they knew he had not done the bad thing.

There were footsteps in the hall. Raymond's door opened. Mr. Kettrick came into the room. He had the shotgun. "I told you to dress," he said.

Raymond had to dress. And march downstairs, and outside of the house. Mr. Kettrick marched back of him down the lane, pushing him sometimes. And the bull let out a bellow and Raymond could hear the slam of the bull's head hitting the pen.

They were almost at the barn when Raymond heard the car from back up toward the house, and then its headlights were shining across their backs and laying their shadows out long in front of them, and the horn was honking hard.

"George!" It was Mrs. Kettrick yelling. The car stopped and she got out and came running in her bathrobe. "George, you can't do it."

"Get back to the house, Ella. March, Raymond. March. Go back, woman, or I'll knock you down."

Raymond could not help it. He broke away and he started to run and it was the wrong thing to do. He knew it was the wrong thing to do when he did it, but he could not help it and then he was falling on his face and there was the fire from Hell burning him and he was dying and it hurt so bad to die that he started to cry.

They came up to him, growing fainter very quickly; the gun in Mr. Kettrick's hands seemed to be pointing at his head again and Raymond sobbed, "Don't shoot me no more," and the gun moved off without shooting.

Mrs. Kettrick said, "My God, the poor devil . . ."

Raymond tried to tell them, but no words came out. He tried to tell them to please carry him back up to the house where he belonged and not let him die out here in the cold all alone but right in his bed in his own private room like one of the family where he had made good and helped Agatha with the multiplication table clean through the sixes one times one is one one times two is two and everything had turned out good after all which was how everything always did turn out when you came right down to it.

Anything Goes

What's the use of climbing down, man, when you can fly?

BY HAL ELLSON

IF YOU got the stuff, nobody's your friend. Don't have it and your worst enemy's a nice guy who'll let you go for a shot.

I ain't got the stuff, ain't got the money to buy me a taste this morning.

Okay, I'm not sick yet. I got time. It's the usual thing, a question of money, and that's what busts you down. You figure maybe you ain't going to get the money, and you start sweating it out before time.

Hook or crook, you usually get it. But this is a bad day. Nothing goes right.

If I ask Moms for dough, she'll hit the roof. I go for a walk. Zero's my buddy, but he ain't on the scene. He ain't nowhere. Maybe the cops got him.

I hit the poolroom, candy store. He ain't there. It's a hot day, but that's not why I'm sweating.

I bust up to Zero's house, knock on the door. No good, nobody's in. All the way up the stairs I got the feeling nobody's home.

I hit for the roof. The tar is boiling, nobody's there. I hit some

more places, cellars, hallways, a couple of alleys. Zero ain't to be found. I know I ain't going to catch him, and I swing back to the poolroom.

My connection got to be there. Maybe he'll let me slide again. I bust in. He's sitting near the back getting his shoes shined, dressed like a millionaire.

Got to wait till the shoeshine goes. He throws the kid a half, gets up, and I move in. He gives me a bad look.

"You want something, Ace?"

I know by his tone he ain't in no charity mood, but I got to try. I try.

"Nay, man, I can't let you go for nothing more," he tells me. "It's time for the pay-off."

"You know I'm good for it, Al. I give you all my business."

"Cause I let you slide, Ace."

"Let me go one more time, man. I'm down."

"Tough on you, boy."

That's it. I'm against a stone wall. There's no use hanging around.

I cut out. Soon as I hit the street, I spot the shoe-shine. He's up ahead. A little runt with toothpick legs and ears like a bat. He's got that half on him that Al threw him, maybe more.

If I knowed him, I could talk him out of it, but I don't know him from nothing. Okay, I follow him along, turn the q, start catching up. I want that half and whatever else he's got.

A good thing the scene's deserted. The street's blazing, nobody much around. I catch up, and the kid turns. His eyes go down to my shoes and come up.

"Shine?"

"Okay, little punk, you want to make a dime?"

"Yeah, big punk."

I got to laugh, cause he's a tough little stud. "Okay," I tell him. "But not here. In the alley, out of the sun."

We move into the alley. The kid's got his box slung over his shoulder.

He turns and I grab the strap, shove him against the wall, bring the strap hard against his throat.

"Okay, punk, fork it over or you ain't going to see the sun go down."

I got to give him credit. The kid ain't scared. He tries to fight back, but I put pressure on the strap and his eyes start popping.

He's ready to give. I let up on the strap and tell him, "One squawk out of you and you'll be dead. Now where's the earnings?"

He don't answer. A slap in the puss straightens him and he hands me the half Al gave him.

"Where's the rest, punk?" I let him have some knuckle and muscle hard in the gut. His hand goes in his pocket, and he gives me a load of coin. I slap his pocket to make sure no loose stuff is staying behind.

He's clean. I move out of the alley, go back to the pool room and look up Al. He ain't around. I get the word he's at his pad.

I cut for there, climb the stairs and knock on the door. This character opens up. I know him, he knows me. His eyes is small, and I know he's high.

I coast in, see some of Al's aces. A party's going on, nothing but big junkie's here. They don't pay me no mind. I look around, and finally this cat that opened the door says, "Who you looking for?"

"Al. This is business."

"I'll see. Stick around."

He goes in the back, and I look at the others. It's a real junk party and these cats is flipping.

The other guy don't come back. I take a chance, walk in the back, open the door and see Al and this broad. The broad is goofed. Al don't like seeing me.

Tough, I need the stuff and I tell him that.

"I'm busy, boy. Take a walk."

"Man, it's creeping up my back."

He looks at me and looks at the broad. She's nodding. That does the trick.

"Wait down the street, Ace."

"Okay, man, don't hang up on me."

I leave the scene, go down the stairs and wait it out. But that stud ain't coming down. Nobody is. I stand in the hall and the house is dead.

A couple of studs pass me on the way in. Big junkies. I know them good. They go up the stairs.

I figure to give Al a minute and I'm going up and pound the door. But there's steps coming down. They're real slow. Somebody's high.

I wait it out, and see this guy hit the last flight. He's naturally high. A big stud with a round head, eyes like doorknobs and he can't keep them open. He comes down like a zombie and passes me blind.

I can't wait no more on Al. I hit the stairs, knock on the door again. The same stud opens up. Man, this time most everybody's gone and nodding all over the place.

I go to the back room. The broad's still there, out like a light. No sign of Al. I go through the other rooms. A guy is shooting up in the toilet, another nodding in the kitchen.

I ask a stud in the living room if he knows where Al is. He gives me a far-away smile. He don't know where his own head is. But Al ain't here. Maybe he cut out over the roof.

Ain't no sense hanging around. I hit the street, and the shoe-shine is back. This big cat is with him. He's a bruisy character, got a kid-bat in his hand. It's a small piece, small enough to split your brain.

I know when I'm licked. Maybe I could run out on him, but I ain't in condition, and this boy can run. I know he can.

That money is his, so I do the only thing, drop coins all over the stoop, back track, hit the stairs and run for the roof.

There's a yell behind me, that's all.

The roof door's open. The sky is clean up there. A flock of pigeons shoots by. Bam, and they're gone. The sky's clean again.

I start climbing. Anybody on the roof today is plain goofed, but I got nothing to lose.

Yeah, there he is. That Junkie boy is laying out flat like he's dead. Tar's boiling around him.

I toe him with my boot and he don't move. Give it to him again and he shoves it away. Once more and he comes awake. He keeps staring like I'm a ghost, blinks, then gives me a funny smile like it ain't natural.

"What's happening, Ace?"

"Nothing."

"So what you doing up here?"

"Browsing. There's nothing else to do. You ain't hot?"

Junkie's dripping. He wipes his face and picks himself up.

"It was cool enough last night," he says.

"You was up here all night?"

"I can't go in. My big brother's waiting to see me, and I don't want to see him.

"He's a rough stud."

"You're telling me!"

We both laugh, then catch eyes. He knows something's cooking. Yeah, maybe he's punchy, but he ain't dumb. He's waiting on me, like he knows I got to ask.

"Look, man, how'd you like some stuff?"

A smile is all over his face now. "Man, I'd like to be stoned dead," he tells me. Next, he's scratching himself. I got the feeling he's strictly a phony. A ten-cent cigar would stone him like a monkey.

"You feel like it, Junkie?"

"Yeah, I feel like it."

"Then what do you say?"

"You got the stuff?"

"Man, why you think I'm asking you?"

"But I thought you had it."

"And I thought you did."

"That makes us even but I ain't got it, and I ain't got the green stuff that gets it. You got any coin?"

"Nay."

"You got any stuff?"

"You know how it is, Ace. What you buy, you use for yourself. You don't exactly spread it around."

"But you and me is friends for a long time."

"Maybe. But we ain't ever been that friendly."

I figure I'm licked. If he's got it, he ain't going to give. If he ain't, it don't matter.

But I give it a try. "You want to know something?" I tell him. "I heard around that you're strictly a phony."

"You hear lots of things around. That don't mean nothing."

"I'm almost ready to believe what I hear, Junkie. That you're a phony from way back."

"Who told you that?"

"Naturally, I ain't naming names, but you ain't on the stuff. You don't know what it's like."

"Yeah, I'm a real stone diddy-bop."

"You got to show me, man."

"When is that?"

"As of now, Junkie."

He looks at me like he's ready to choke. "I've been stoned dead more times than I can count."

"You got to show me, man."

"Okay, you want to see, I'm going to show you."

"Hey, wait. Do I get a taste?"

"I'll let you swing this time."

He's moving to the roof door. I figure he's heading for the cellar and I ain't wrong. We reach there, walk to the back, face a stone wall. He swings around, starts scratching himself and grinning at me.

"Man, don't keep it waiting," I tell him.

"I got my own, Ace, and I'm ready to feed it."

He turns to the wall, jiggers a brick from the wall, sticks his hand in the hole and feels around.

Next, he's facing me, telling the sad news.

"It ain't there, Ace. Somebody robbed me. Man, what am I going to do?"

This is strictly a phony act, like he's going to fall on his face if he don't get his shot. I haul from way back, punch him on the mouth, give him another on the jaw. He goes down, don't come up, and I walk away.

Things is desperate now, so I walk to the candy store, ready to mop the floor for the price of a shot. I reach the door and my boy Zero walks out.

"Hey, where was you? I been cruising the scene, Zero."

He laughs like it's a joke. "Busy working on a little project, Ace."

"Man, you got something? I'm all out."

"You want to go up the pad?"

"I'll go to the moon."

We hit for Zero's house. In no time we're there. He gets a cup of water, locks his room door, and I sit on the bed, sweat it out, watch him cook it up. It's his stuff, so he goes first.

He loads up. The spike is ready, his arm strapped. He rubs the vein to bring it out, then hits himself and the spike is in. He starts booting it. I start counting.

"Man, it's the best," he says.

I get the works now, clean the needle, load up. My hands is shaking. I'm not old at this. I'm scared I won't get the vein, but I hit it on the head, draw blood and start to boot . . .

Yeah, it's good stuff. I feel that numbness hitting my brain.

Zero reaches out, puts the radio on soft, and we stay there and

nod. Both of us is goofed.

Later, Zero goes for sodas. I'm thirsty. Both of us are.

We drink and talk, and I tell him about Junkie and what I done to him.

"He never had no stuff in that hole in the wall. He jived you bad, Ace."

"I paid him back double. He was bleeding like a hacked pig when I left him."

"That's a goofy cat. Gone. He's all gone. That boy sees stuff come out of the wall. Man, I was with him once. He was seeing men coming out of the wall, all kinds of people from way back. Indians and such. Man, he scared me."

"He really saw them things?"

"Nay, he thought he did, but I wasn't hanging around to see. I took my hat and flew."

"He could have seen things, Zero."

"What do you mean?"

"You can look at a wall and see things. Look long enough and anything can come out."

"Like what?"

"Anything, man. Once in the bathroom this rat came out of the wall. There was no hole, but he came out anyhow."

"I never seen nothing like that."

"Okay, so you didn't. I did."

"You was shooting bad stuff."

The afternoon goes like that. We talk it away, and somebody comes up the stairs. The front door opens. That's Zero's Moms. There's war between us, so I take the usual route and hit the fire escape.

I swing for the roof, reach it and come down the stairs. Yeah, the battle's on. Things is busting in Zero's apartment. All the way down the stairs I hear that woman bitching off.

I'm out. The street's okay, shadows laying across the gutter, people around. Things seem natural. It's getting to be eating time. I got no appetite for food, got no appetite for nothing. Night's coming on. It's going to be hot, people be out, window's open. There's a dozen ways to make me some real bread, and I'm going to make it.

It's up and down. Sometimes you got the money, and sometimes you ain't. But you got to feed the habit. You got to keep getting the moolah. You get it the easy way if you can, but it ain't all easy. Then you do it the hard way. But the idea is to get it.

A couple of nights later me and Zero is real beat. It's been a bad day, no pickings. We're up against the big wall again. It comes down to the usual. We're set for a mugging.

Got to wait, though. At eleven o'clock we move into a quiet block, wait in a doorway. It ain't long and we spot our man. He's coming toward us. Being it's Friday night, we assume he's got money.

"This is our kitty, Zero. You

ready?" I say.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

That's all. This ain't the United Nations. We knows what to do. Zero stands against the wall, I cross the sidewalk and lean against a car.

Okay, this is it. You wait it out, sweat it out. He's coming at you. I feel tight inside, my muscles is knots. This ain't no kid, this is a man you got to beat down, and you tighten your fists.

I hear his steps nearer and nearer and I don't look. I play it cool all the way, but my heart's going *boom boom,* and the sweat's dripping down.

He passes, gives us his back. That's the signal. I stick my hand in my belt, slip it out, twist it around my hand a couple of times, and let him have the buckle a couple of times on the side of the head.

Zero ain't napping. He's got his blade out in case there's trouble. There ain't any. The buckle does the trick. I give him a knee in the ribs. He goes down. That's it. He's done, and I'm blowing hard, looking down while Zero's taking the dough.

He finishes the job, and we grab the guy, pick him up, drag him into a door and walk away.

A week later, me and Zero get a real scare. We got the stuff on us, but it ain't safe to shoot up in his pad. His Moms is home, and I'm out.

So he gets the works and we hit for the roof. Nobody's up there, and that's fine. We get set, and that's when it happens.

Two guys pop out of nowhere, and they're on us before we can do anything. They're Federal men.

Next, we're up against the skylight. A quick frisk and they got the works and a sixteenth of stuff. It's curtains for us. Man, there ain't no way out.

That's what I think, but I'm wrong on that. Hell, the Federals don't want us, they're after bigger stuff. One guy does all the talking. He's real cool. Got that sixteenth in his hand and letting us see it.

"Well, what do you say?" he tells us.

I'm scared, but I'm also mad as a motherjumper. "What do you want us to say?" I ask him.

"Don't be wise," he says. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"Okay, you got us cold. What do you want us to do, make a speech?"

I figure he's going to bash me for that. He makes a move, holds his fist and laughs.

"How old are you?" he says.

"Fifteen."

He shakes his head. "That's what I thought. But don't think that's going to save you. Do you know where we can send you?"

"Where?"

"The Island."

I knew he was going to say that before I asked, and now I'm scared and I keep shut.

The other Federal opens his

mouth and says, "They're just kids, they're not to blame."

The first guy looks at me and says, "Do you want to help yourselves?"

I'm suspicious but I ask him how.

"Give us your connection."

"You think we're crazy?"

"Then you don't want to cooperate? All right, tighten your belts and come along."

"Wait a minute, Frank," the other Fed says. "Give them a break. Let them think it over. They're not stupid. Give them a chance."

"There's nothing to think about," Zero tells him. "We can't give you our connection. You know that."

But Zero's wrong. The Island ain't for me. They say it's a good place, but I'll take the gutter any time. Besides, I'm down on Al. He ain't been treating us so good any more.

Zero tries to stop me but I shut him and tell the Feds what they want to know, shoot them the facts.

That's all. They let us be and cruise down the stairs.

"Man," Zero tells me, "your life ain't worth nothing now. That Al'll slit you in little pieces."

"How do you figure that?"

"You ratted, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I ratted cause he's been swindling us. It was us or him. I made sure it wasn't us."

"You're a dead duck."

"Nay, man, he ain't going to know. The Feds won't tell him, and we won't see him for a long time to come."

"Yeah, but he's got friends."

"You ain't my friend?"

"Sure, I am."

"Then he ain't going to know, and his friends ain't, unless you turn rat and tell."

That stops him. There ain't no more to say. We're in the clear, and Al's got a rope around his neck.

I hear about it the next day in the candy store. The Feds bagged Al in the poolroom. Got him cold with the goods. He won't be peddling the stuff for a long time. Tough on him.

A blues is playing. I hear it coming up the stairs. That's my kind of music. Real soft, real good. That carries you.

It's a long climb to the top floor and I got time to think. Me and Zero had words about this party. He don't feature it, and he ain't tagging along.

Shame on him. I feel like going and I'm going. Lola going to be there. I still kind of like that girl. Me and her was skin-tight before she found I had the habit.

Bust the habit and I got her again. She be loving me, nobody else. Yeah, her big brother had to tell her, and my big brother got to tell me. Be home early tonight or else . . .

Big brother knows what he can

do. I'm tired of him on my back, tired of hearing him big-talk me.

That blues record fades off and I stop climbing, start again when another disc slides on. Going to see Lola-baby. She going to be there. I reach the landing, knock on the door.

A peephole opens. Man, a big eye bugs me from behind the door. The door swings open and I'm inside. The atmosphere is cool, real cool, lights low, that music like smoke in my brain. Man, this is sophisticated.

I dig the scene. I know most everybody. A couple of studs is strange, a couple of broads, but that's expected.

I meet this girl and we hit if off good. She's blowing pot, and she's half-goofed.

"I didn't see you before," she tells me. "Want to smoke with me?"

"Girl, I'll do anything with you. You know how it is. We're together."

A new record sneaks on. It's real soft. I feel like dancing, so we dance.

"Me and you, we have to get along," I say in her ear. "We're together."

"Yeah, Ace, I know we are. I like to be with you."

"You're with me."

"Okay."

We talk the record out, sit down and go into a kiss. Man, she's all over me. I get off a kick and we relax.

"You're new around," I say.

"Yeah."

"How come you come here?"

"Maybe cause I knew I'd meet somebody like you."

"Yeah, and this is for real. I know you, I know you're cute. I can't forget about you, I know you all the time. You can't quit me now."

"You don't have to love me," she tells me. "But if you want to, it's up to you, honey."

"Look, I'm taking you home. What's your address?"

She tells me it and then I jive her, tell her, "There's only one trouble, you're fourteen, and you're too young to play with."

That's wrong to say. She bites me. I slap her face and she pulls back. It's all over, but that's where I'm wrong.

"That feels good," she says.

Man, this girl is weird. I want to slap her again but I hold my hand. I go.

I hit my house after midnight. Yeah, now I remember what my brother said. But he don't scare me none. The hell with him.

I go up the stairs, come to the last flight and see somebody sitting at the top step. He's only a shadow smoking a butt. Can't recognize him, but I know who it is.

I'm stopped, and I'm kind of shaky. Who knows? Maybe it ain't my brother, but it's got to be.

I know it's him when he says, "What time is it?"

I tell him it's after twelve.

"What time did I tell you to be in?"

"Ten-thirty." I don't know what to say then.

He puts his butt out against the step. Yeah, he's getting ready, and I don't feel so good now.

"You're kind of late, punk."

"Look, don't punk me, big brother. I was walking my girl home. That's why I was late. Besides, you ain't my father to tell me what to do."

"You're lucky I ain't, cause I'd beat you bloody."

"So therefore you ain't got no business telling me nothing."

He don't answer that. Maybe he's tired of waiting on me. He looks down, and I look up. That's all. We ain't got no more to say. He moves, goes in the apartment.

I let the door close, and I start up the stairs, stop on the landing. The hell with him. He can't do nothing. I move on in.

Yeah, he's waiting in the kitchen, and he's got his belt off.

"What's that for?" I say.

"What do you figure?"

"You ain't going to do nothing with that."

"So you think you're big enough to stop me now, is that it?"

"I could try. I ain't going to stand and do nothing."

"Go on to bed, you little punk. I'm giving you a chance, but make it fast."

For a second I don't move. Maybe he wants a clean shot at me. I take my chance, pass him. I'm ready to swing out but I can't. That's my own brother.

"You better move faster," he tells me.

That boils me. I go to the bathroom and bust back out of there with a hair bottle. I throw it at him, miss.

He moves and I hardly don't see his fist. It comes out of nowhere and I'm down on the oilcloth and don't know what's happening, except next I'm being carried to my room. He throws me on the bed like a bag of flour.

Next morning I'm getting out of bed when my brother walks in.

"This is early for you, ain't it, punk?" he says. "What's the matter, you sick?"

I don't answer but get up and swing at him. A rap in the jaw and I'm back on the bed.

"You want to try me again, punk?" he says.

I want to but I can't.

"I'm waiting for you, punk."

"Yeah, keep it up," I say.

"Punk."

"Why you have to keep calling me that?"

"Cause you are one. You're a cheap little hood."

"Okay, if that makes you happy, keep saying it. It don't hurt me none."

"You're more than that. I know what you're doing."

"Yeah, what am I doing?"

"You been blowing pot."

"That's something?"

"Something I ought to bust your butt for. But there's more. You've started using the needle."

"Man, you're crazy. That's one thing I'd never touch. I ain't that stupid."

"You're more stupid than that."

"Yeah, you throw all that big brother jive at me like you know everything, and you know nothing, see?"

He don't answer that, and I go to reach for my cigarettes. It's the wrong thing. He springs at me, grabs my arm. He's got me so I can't move, my arm stretched out.

"So you don't take the needle?" he says. "Then what the hell are these holes in your arm, mosquito bites?"

"What holes? Man, you're seeing things."

"Don't hand me that. I know what I see. I ought to tear your arms off so you can't use it."

"Man . . ."

"And don't man me. Listen, you little son of a bitch, and listen good. I been watching you and I'm going to be watching you harder from now on. I'm going to check you good and if I see any more marks, I'm going to beat you down into breadcrumbs. You understand? I'll beat you so bad Pops and Moms won't know you as their son."

I know I'm beat, and arguing won't do no good. I try to jive him and say, "Okay, so I fooled around with it, but it was just for fun. I wanted to see what it was like, and it was nothing. I'm not on it. I'm off it for good."

"You can believe this," he tells me. "Keep it up and I'm going to bust you down flat so you'll never get up."

The door opens and Pops looks in. "What's the noise?" he says.

"Ask him," my brother answers, and he blows out.

Pops shakes his head. That's all. The door closes behind him.

Next day's a blip. Real hot. Me and Zero see a show. We let the afternoon slide like that, come out when it's almost dark, walk around the turf, buy some sweets and pop, plenty of pop, and hit for the poolroom.

We cool it there. Nothing much is happening. It's getting dark, lights going on. We move out of the poolroom, hit for our favorite roof.

The tar's clean, nobody around. Zero's got the works on him. It's time to feed our habits. We get off, and the kick is good. I'm nodding like a motherjumper already, a cool breeze from the river's fanning my face.

Zero's walking around. I tell him to cool it. But he's got to hide the works in case somebody comes up and bags us.

He hides the stuff and sits next to me. We both nod off.

Later, some more cats start drifting up to the roof. Zero's got business on and cuts out. I stay around.

There's six of us on the roof now. Everybody's blowing pot. Nobody's doing any talking. We suck on the sticks.

A couple of sticks and a couple of guys start goofing off. They're laughing. That's the kick.

Yeah, get hung up and you laugh at anything. Me, I like to dig the scene in the park when I'm high on pot.

You can hear the wind in the trees when nobody else can. I can see more, be staring at a lamp-post and I laugh at it cause it's wobbling and I think it's going to fall.

I'm on my third stick and I feel I can lick anybody in the world. I'm like a king. If I say something, other people got to do it. I feel like running. I'm going to take off any second and run, run, run to any place, run for the rest of my life.

Joe is getting a kick. He bends over and hits his chest, stands up.

"Hey, man, where you going?" Marimba asks him.

"Downstairs."

"No you ain't."

"I'm going to blow my top."

"Hey, Joe come back."

Joe don't answer and heads for the stairs. Marimba's up, he grabs him, belts him, knocks him down. Next, he's got his shiv out and at Joe's throat.

"You staying?"

"Okay, man, I'm staying."

Everybody's laughing. A couple of guys get up and move down to the street.

Joe walks around the roof. "Man, what's the use of climbing down when you can fly," he says.

"That's a nutty cat," Marimba tells me. "Let's take a walk."

He leaves with the others. I stay. There's just me and Joe. He's talking crazy, laughing and jiving about how he knows he can fly.

I look away, see a chimney and it starts swaying. Joe's over by the edge of the roof, flapping his arms like a bird and laughing. That boy's goofed, I'm thinking. Yeah, real goofed.

Next thing, he jumps. Man, I'm not believing it. But he ain't there.

I'm up and running for the stairs. I run all the way down and come out on the sidewalk.

Yeah, he's laying out. He's busted clean through an awning and stretched on the sidewalk laughing. A woman's screaming. A crowd comes around. Joe can't get up. His leg's twisted funny, and one arm. And his head . . . A squad car comes on the scene, a little later an ambulance, to take Joe away.

That's all. Next day I hear he's dead. Man, that's a blip. You're here today, gone tomorrow. Smoke a couple of sticks and do yourself up. It don't make sense, but what does around the scene? Who cares? What's the difference? Let me go with the jive and you can have everything else.

There's a crowd around Joe's door the next night. I bust through the crowd around the stoop, go up the stairs and walk in the house.

People is all over the place. Some are praying, some crying.

I walk across the room to the coffin. It's got a glass open-thing on top, three candles on each side, a lot of white flowers.

Joe looks different, kind of pale. He looks dead, and is dead. That's kind of scaring, but I don't feel nothing. When you're dead you're dead, that's all.

But, man, I'm smelling them flowers, and that gets me. A dead-people smell. I hate that and I move away from the coffin, meet his sister in the hall.

"Don't worry," I tell her, "everybody has to die sooner or later."

"Don't tell me what to do, I know what to do," she says, and then she slaps me, hard.

I let that pass and walk down the stairs. When I'm a block away it hits me.

Joe is dead. Real dead. That could be me tried to fly.

I run home, up the stairs. My brother's in.

"What's wrong? The cops chasing you again?"

"No. I'm off the stuff."

He looks at me hard.

"I run all the way."

"You ain't in it too deep, like you said."

"Not too deep to bust it."

"Okay, we going to bust it, or bust you, little brother." He grabs my shirt, pulls me up close to him. "Bust you flat as Joe, little brother. Okay?"

I wet my lips. I know he means it. I still got time to wiggle out.

"Okay," I say.

One for the Road

According to a dispatch from Kittilae, Finland, a resident was fined $30 after he pleaded guilty of drunken driving with a reindeer.

Chicken Fee

In East Hartford, Connecticut, Frederick J. Rundbaken, an attorney, admitted in court that his client was guilty of a traffic violation. Then he asked the judge to impose a light fine. "My client is so hard up financially," Rundbaken explained, "that he gave me a chicken in payment for representing him."

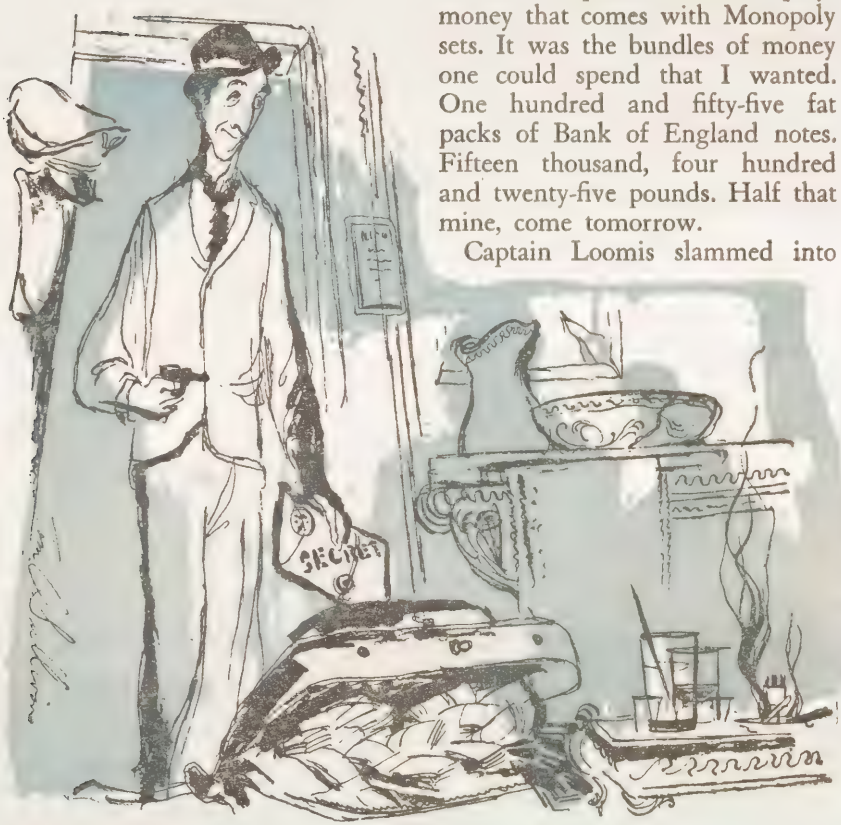
The Sealed Envelope

A Novelette

BY ALLEN LANG

I STACKED the bundles on the shelf labeled HIGH BASCOMBE. The sixty thousand dollars already in the safe were in military scrip, harder to spend than the play-money that comes with Monopoly sets. It was the bundles of money one could spend that I wanted. One hundred and fifty-five fat packs of Bank of England notes. Fifteen thousand, four hundred and twenty-five pounds. Half that mine, come tomorrow.

Captain Loomis slammed into



Harmless looking, this envelope that came with the army payroll holdup. And then they opened it . . .

the Finance Office and stomped over to rattle the door of the counting-cage. "Let me in, Barney," he said. "My wife will raise hell if I let supper get cold."

I picked up my .45 first—regulations—then pressed the buzzer that unlocks the cage. Loomis came in, slamming the grill door behind him to lock it. "Even if she has cold-cuts on the table, my wife raises hell if I let supper get cold," he complained. The captain glanced into the safe, gave a stack of ten-dollar military scrip a lovepat, and looked up to meet the photo of Anne, my wife. I have her picture above the safe to keep reminding me what a lucky man I am. "Sergeant Barnaby," Captain Loomis said, "how'd an atrocity-looking type like you ever hook yourself a pretty girl like that?"

"I'm beautiful, Captain; I use GI Soap; I got engaged," I explained. "And, Captain, tomorrow by this time I'll be sipping tea with her in front of our own little fireplace in Staines."

Loomis slammed the safe shut. "November isn't the best month for a furlough in England," he said. "I suppose you and Anne will manage to keep warm, though."

"We'll drink lots of tea," I said.

"Tea is very warming," the captain agreed. He looked at Anne's photo again and sighed. I felt for Captain Loomis. I'd seen Mrs. Loomis.

"Okay if I take off?" I asked. "I'd like to get into London before all the shops close, to buy Anne a welcome-to-England present."

"Sure, Sergeant," Loomis agreed. "Here," he said, reaching into his shirt pocket. "I brought you a present, too, Barney." He handed me his gift, a bottle of one hundred multiple-vitamin tablets.

"Thanks, Captain Loomis," I said. "See you in thirty days."

"Take your vitamins," Loomis grinned, "and maybe you'll make it." He let me out of the cage ahead of him.

I took off for the NCO barracks. Everything not already at our flat in Staines was packed now and in my car. My uniforms were there, two boxes of panatellas, and the manila envelope holding twenty-four copies of my leave orders. And in the glove compartment were the tools we'd need tomorrow, two streamlined Mauser .32 automatics.

One of those guns was for me. The other was for Corporal John McKey, Royal Air Force. I'd met Jock and his wife at *The Green Man,* a pub in my new hometown of Staines. From the way Jock McKey played Pontoon—that's British for the game of Twenty-One—I knew he was the man to help me in my half-planned project. Jock played cards like a man with larceny in his heart.

He'd made the first move, suggesting a scheme to get a few cases of PX cigarettes on the black mar-

ket and a few pounds in our pockets. "No soap, Jock," I said. "The risks in that are too big to take for a few quid. I think decent stakes in that sort of game would be about seven and a half thousand pounds apiece. Don't you?"

Jock raked his fingers back through his coarse red hair, which porcupined up again the instant his hand was off it. "Sergeant, have you got your eye cocked on Barclay's Bank?" he asked.

"No. Wing Finance Office, USAF West Drayton," I said.

Jock nodded. "There's a lot of lolly in a Yank paymaster's office," he observed. "I'd like to have a go at it, Slick."

I picked up our empty mugs and toted them over to the bar to have them squirted full of mild-and-bitter again. As I sat down Jock had questions ready. "How do we do it? Break-in?"

"Holdup," I corrected. "First, Jock, I want you to know that the split of our take will be down the middle to the last ha'penny. Second, I'm the boss. I call the plays. Okay?"

Jock raised his glass in answer. "Here's to you, Slick," he said. "You've just acquired a partner."

"Then we'll get down to business," I said. I glanced around. The Saloon Bar, where we sat, was empty. And a noisy darts-game from the Public Bar across the counter made sure we wouldn't be overheard there. "We're going for the High Bascombe payroll while it's on the road from West Drayton," I said. "There are six squadrons at High Bascombe, so we'll get a bundle."

"How much?" Jock asked.

"At the end of October it will be about sixty-four thousand dollars," I said. "Trouble is, that will be in 'invasion money,' the blue-and-pink military scrip we use in the PX. That stuff is bundled by series, a cinch for the Air Bobbies to trace. We can't use military scrip."

"So what do we go for, Slick? Just the thrill of the thing?"

"There's conversion every payday, Jock," I said. "That means that the troops are allowed to exchange some of the military scrip they get at the pay table for Bank of England notes to spend on the 'Dilly. You and I go for those quid, Jock. Pounds we can spend."

"That we can," Jock agreed, mowing his hands through his hair. "What about ordnance, Slick?"

"Weapons? I've got two Mausers brought over from Stüttgart by a friend of mine," I said. "They can't be traced."

"Set this job up solid, Slick," Jock said quietly. "Using guns in England is a sticky business."

"Don't get in a sweat, Jock," I said. "We'll take the High Bascombe payroll as neatly as they change the guard at Buckingham Palace."

October thirty-first was our D-Day. Anne's plane was to come in at two P.M.; my wife-welcoming furlough began that day. Jock had finagled himself a three-day grant and an alibi in Glascow. We'd held rehearsals on Bascombe Road in the early morning, holding up foggy shadows to get used to automatics in our hands. We'd practiced till my stopwatch said the job would take two minutes. Everything was timetabled, screwed down tight to schedule.

At eight forty-five, we stood in the fog for the real thing, with the guns in our pockets. There was the taste of fear in my mouth now, a taste that hadn't been there for the dry-runs, and by Jock's quiet I knew he was tasting what I was. We were on the road leading from High Bascombe to the USAF station at the top of Bascombe Hill, a natural ambush-spot, for the road burrowed through a tunnel of bushes and tight-packed trees. Our bicycles were planted down the road ten yards nearer town, their saddlebags gaping to take our loot. In the fog and on the steep Bascombe Hill Road, bicycles would be faster than any souped-up getaway car.

"Got the wire-cutters, Slick?" Jock suddenly demanded.

I jumped. "Hell, yes!" I snapped, ashamed to have betrayed my nervousness. I felt in the left pocket of my trenchcoat just to make sure. The cutters were there, just as they'd been at the start of our dry-runs. The fusee was tucked under my arm like a field-marshall's baton, the Mauser weighted down my right pocket. "What's the matter, Jock? Buck fever?"

"Just checking, Slick."

I tugged down the cuff of my white glove to see my wristwatch. Eight fifty-five. "Staff car should be here in five minutes," I said. "They'll have started early, since the fog will hold them down to ten miles an hour."

"Cut it!" Jock snapped. I helped him listen. Sure enough, there was the mutter of a straining engine, down near the bottom of Bascombe Hill. A few minutes, a pause, and then the engine-sound again, louder, relieved to be on level road. Jock and I tugged our cap-brims low, turned up the collars of our trenchcoats. Now we looked like half the men in England. Twenty seconds to go. I snatched the fusee from under my arm and trotted to the center of the road. I stabbed the nailed end of the fusee into the asphalt, stripped off the top, and rubbed the sharkskin striking-surface across the striker. A red flame jetted into the fog. I crossed the road to be standing behind the staff car when it stopped.

It was a blue blob in the fog, drawing close to the fusee's warning light like a cautious animal. The driver stopped to investigate.

He unfolded himself from under the wheel and walked up to the sputtering fusee. Jock's cue.

Jock trotted up to meet the driver. "One bloody hell of a smash-up ahead!" Jock shouted. "Lorry turned over, two people still trapped in the bloody thing. We've got to tip it back, carry 'em to hospital."

"What's this?" The payroll officer, a major, levered down his doorhandle and stepped onto the road. He had his .45 in the holster at his waist, over his overcoat; the flap had been tucked back to free the pistol-butt for a quick draw. "What's happened?" he demanded.

I stepped behind the major and pressed my Mauser against his neck. "Hands up!" I grunted. The major spread his elbows like a cowboy about to draw, thought better of it, and slowly raised his hands. I slipped his .45 from the holster and tossed it into the bushes beside the road. The major turned to face me, his jaw down as though he'd just dropped something precious and fragile. "This is... this is . . ." he stammered.

"Walk ahead, Major," I said, swallowing my voice to give me a pseudo-British accent. He walked into the custody of Jock's Mauser. I leaned into the car to check the man who still sat there. He was fumbling with the woolen muffler he wore, as though he were trying to get his glasses or something from an inside pocket. I swallowed hard as the silver thunderheads on his capbrim glinted in my eyes. He wore two stars on each shoulder, too. "Out!" I grunted, "with your hands up." I kept from adding, "Sir," with an effort.

"You boys are making a big mistake," the general said. "If you stop now, you've committed only a misdemeanor."

I backed him alongside the driver, under Jock's gun.

"Come along, gentlemen," Jock invited the men. He shepherded them out of sight into the trees, working like an efficient collie. I had a minute in which to take up our collection.

I tugged the staff car's hood open and clipped six wires. I slammed the hood and went to the back seat. There lay the bait that had brought us here, seven paper grocery sacks. One of them held our fifteen grand in pounds; the others held the six squadron payrolls in military scrip. I didn't have time to nose out the one we wanted, so I bundled the lot into my arms. A bulging manila envelope lay on the seat. I scooped it up, too, and carried the mess of paper to our bicycles. It was a heavy load, all those thousands of dollars. I rammed the paper bags and the envelope into the four saddlebags and strapped everything tight. It would be too damned bad if we were to scatter money down Bascombe Hill. Fifty-five seconds expended. No one on the road, not

for the five yards I could see in either direction.

"All clear!" I bellowed. That was Jock's signal. I rolled our two bicycles onto the asphalt and held Jock's out with one arm as I sat astride mine. I heard him mumble something to his prisoners, suggesting that they stay put in the woods for a spell. Then, unexpectedly, a shot. A second shot followed quick as an echo.

Jock's big feet slapped along the pavement. He rounded the bend with streamers of fog trailing off him, and leaped on his bike like a six-day racer in sight of the last lap. I followed Jock around the corner to the right, down through the fog on Bascombe Hill like a blindfolded man on a two-wheeled roller-coaster. Standing on the pedals I managed to pull alongside Jock.

"What happened?" I shouted across to him.

"All your damned generals wear shoulder-holsters?" Jock demanded. "Doesn't he know we're a friendly country?"

"Did you hurt him?" I yelled.

"I made him drop that bloody wee gun, right enough!" We spun left at the base of the hill, hardly able to see the curb eight inches from our wheels. We rode our bikes right into the slots of the parking-racks that rim the High Bascombe football field. It's really soccer they play there, but the Blokes insist it's football. We locked the bikes to abandon them. Parked here, they wouldn't be noticed for a week or more; when noticed, they'd never be traced to us. I unhitched my saddlebags; Jock got his, and we slung them over our shoulders.

We carried the bags to my Ford, which I'd parked beside the Liberal Club's liberal lawn and the "Notice of Coming Lectures." We dumped the bags of money in the back, beside my empty B-4 bag. I picked up Jock's little cardboard suitcase, his RAF uniform inside it, and handed it out the door. "See you at the Imperial Hotel in an hour," I said.

Jock nodded and marched off into the fog with his suitcase. He had five minutes to catch the London train. We'd cut things pretty fine. I started the Ford and drove past the Bucks Constabulary Station, east through the fog toward London.

I took a cigar from the glove-compartment—pardon me, the dash-cubby—and lit it. Taking the Mauser .32 from my trenchcoat pocket, I checked the thumb-safety and hid it under the envelope of leave papers in the dash-cubby. Kind of a shame, I thought, grinning past the cigar, that I'd no intention of making a career of crime. I had the knack. The holdup had taken two minutes, just as I'd planned. Ten minutes later, we'd split up and were on our way

to London. Can't beat American knowhow. Everything had worked according to blueprint, all but that trigger-happy major general. I hoped Jock hadn't hurt him bad. It's dirty pool to hurt generals.

I parked beside Ealing Common, shielded by the fog from observation. I wriggled out of the too-large trousers I'd worn over my uniform pants and took off my trenchcoat. I wore my Ike jacket underneath. I took off the golfing cap that looked like a checkered icebag and put on my overseas cap. Leaning over the seat, I zipped open the B-4 bag and stashed this clothing I'd worn as disguise. I opened the saddlebags and transferred the paper sacks of money and the manila envelope into the B-4 bag, too. Now I had everything together, neat and orderly.

The Imperial Hotel, where I was meeting Jock for the payoff, looks like a wedding cake ill-used by pigeons. The Imp was built back when Queen Victoria was running things over here; it's used week ends by Yanks for parties Victoria never would have countenanced. I parked by Russell Square and toted the B-4 bag, banging against my right leg, into the lobby. I signed my CO's name to the register—everyone did that, usually as the first half of a Mr. & Mrs.—and told the room clerk that an RAF corporal would join me soon. The bellboy, old enough to have met Victoria, struggled my B-4 bag to the elevator and up to my room on the seventh floor. I gave him ten bob; he'd earned it. After latching the door, I transferred half a dozen panatellas from the bag to my shirt pocket. I lit one to keep me company while I waited for Jock. First time I'd smoked a cigar wearing gloves.

Dead on time, fifteen minutes after his train reached Marylebone Station, Jock knocked on my door. "It's your rrrrich Uncle John, from ooop Norrrth," he said through the door. I twisted the latch to let Jock in. He was wearing his blanket-thick RAF blues and carrying the little suitcase.

"Everything go all right?" I asked him, locking the door with my room key.

Jock filched a cigar from my shirt pocket. Setting down the suitcase, he stooped by the electric fire to light the cigar. "Smooth as silk, Slick," he grinned, straightening up. He took off his RAF beret and tossed it on the bed. His hair stood up like red crabgrass. "I potted around the platform at High Bascombe till the train got rollin', like you said, then I jumped into a compartment all by mysel'. I was changed inta my uniform before Denham Golf Course. My trenchcoat's all wadded up in m' case, there, with the Mauser and all."

"If I ever decide to crack Fort Knox, Jock, I'll want you with me. I'll ditch your gear with mine.

Are you ready for payday now?"

"I hope you're paying a bit more than that pittance Her Majesty gives me evera fortnight," Jock said. He stripped off his gloves to free his fingers for counting.

"Pull those back on," I said. "Some of this stuff is going back to the Air Force. We want it to go back clean." I zipped open the B-4 bag and brought the paper bags from its bowels, tossing them onto the bed. Wearing white gloves like pallbearers, we started ripping open the stapled grocery bags. Six of them disgorged flashy-looking military scrip, the money we didn't dare spend. We dumped this on the worn carpet. The seventh bag spilled out fifteen thousand, four hundred and twenty-five pounds. I knew the sum exactly. I'd counted those bills only yesterday.

Seventy-seven of the hundred-pound bundles went onto Jock's side of the bed, seventy-seven on mine. I split the remaining package, the small one, and counted out thirteen one-pound notes for Jock. "Now you owe me ten bob," I said.

Dead serious, Jock reached into his pocket and found a limp ten-shilling note to toss onto my side of the bed. I grinned at my partner-in-crime. "Seven thousand, seven hundred and twelve pounds and a half-note, Corporal," I said. "Fit that into your billfold! In dollars, it's almost twenty-two grand. Does that strike you as reasonable wages for a morning's labor?"

"I'll not carp aboot it, Slick," Jock assured me. He picked up the big envelope I'd found on the back seat of the staff car. "Maybe this is our bonus for doin' a neat job of work," he said, ripping it open. "It's a bloody Chinese box," he said, pulling out an inner envelope. This second envelope was white, stamped in three places with a scarlet *TOP SECRET*. Jock ripped it open as though it had been marked *POPCORN*.

"EMERGENCY WAR PLAN," he read from the top of the stapled booklet inside. "ORDER OF DEFENSE, SARGASSO SECTOR."

"Jesus!"

"Why the profanity, Slick?" Jock inquired.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. My money spilled over to rest cozily against my flank. "We couldn't be worse off if we'd kidnapped the Queen of England," I said. "You're holding the NATO Defense Plan for the British Isles, Jock. That's why they had a two-star general riding shotgun on our two-bit payroll."

Jock shrugged. "So where's the skin off our backsides?" he asked. "They can mimeo off another of these. Ach, Slick, to hell wi' the generals; we're fireproof!"

"You miss the gist, Jock," I said. "The Air Force doesn't know that you and I are red-blooded NATO boys who're interested only in their

money. For all they know in Grosvenor Square, the two men who held up the High Bascombe payroll and snatched this EWP were Russian soldiers. They'll have everybody this side of the Iron Fence beating the bushes for us."

Jock tossed the red-marked envelope onto the bed beside his cap. "We'd best ditch the bloody thing," he said. He dumped the clothing he'd worn in the robbery onto the bed, picked up the Mauser and tossed it to me. Then he started filling his suitcase with pound-notes. "It doesn't matter in the bloody least how much worried anyone is, Slick," he said. "They won't find us because you fixed this up good. We're safe as houses." He finished stashing his money away and closed the suitcase. "How's about the rest, there?" he asked, nodding toward the pile of military scrip at the foot of the bed.

"That's just sixty thousand dollars' worth of income tax, Jock," I said. I shoveled my bundles of dough into the middle pouch of my B-4 bag. On top of the money I lay the Mauser that Jock had used.

"I hate to see all that lovely lolly goin' to waste," Jock sighed.

"I'll send it back to Uncle with his precious papers," I said. I reached into my bag for the bottle of Scotch I'd brought along. "Care for a nip to celebrate our success?"

"I'd be happy to join you," Jock said. He nudged the heap of money with his toe. "I've got a wee confession to make you, Slick. I've brought in a speculator to take this off our hands."

"What!"

"There's a chap outside in the hall. He'll give us Bank of England notes for this stuff."

I blew up. "Jock, we can't pass this Scrip. Spend one dollar of it, and you'll get a squadron of Air Police back with your change."

Jock picked my room key off the bed and unlocked the door. "Just talk to the man, Slick." He handed me the key.

Jock's speculator stepped in, a dark man, lean as dried beef, wearing a bowler and looking like a Guards officer in mufti. He looked more like an ambassador than a receiver of stolen goods.

"This is Chalky," Jock said. "Meet Sergeant Barnaby, Chalky?"

"You came here by mistake," I told the dark man. "There isn't anything we have to sell."

Chalky walked over to the pile of Military Scrip. He knelt and picked up two of the bundles as though judging their worth by their weight. "I dare say I could wring a spot of profit from all this," he said. "I'll give you five hundred pounds for the lot."

The offer was so ridiculous I forgot that I wasn't in the market. "That's a piddling price for sixty grand," I snapped. "That's less than one percent!"

"Terribly sorry, Sergeant Barnaby," Chalky said, standing. "I'm in business to make money, not friends. I'm not operating a pukka bank, exchange-rate and all. Passing American Military Scrip is a bit risky, y' know. I'll not be able to distribute it in Threadneedle Street, Sergeant. My bourse is operated by Wardour Street tarts, ladies in an excellent position to make dealings with Yanks. Five hundred pounds is an eminently fair offer, I should think. Take it or let it be, Sergeant."

"We'll leave it," I said. "Now get out, Chalky."

"I say, what is this?" Chalky asked, reaching over the bed toward the envelope stamped TOP SECRET. "I have a devilish thick streak of curiosity."

I reached down toward my B-4 bag, where Jock's Mauser lay on top of my money.

"No, Sergeant!" Chalky snapped. I looked up. He'd gotten a tiny automatic from somewhere and was holding it on a line with my breastbone. "I'd like very much to see what your secret there consists of, Sergeant," he said. "I'm enough interested to risk shooting you to get a glimpse."

"Great friend you have here," I said to Jock. "Why didn't you invite the Soviet Ambassador, too?"

Chalky tugged the EWP from its envelope and flipped through its pages. He glanced up every couple of seconds to keep us covered. "Most flattering, these measures your people are taking to protect me and mine," he observed. "I had really thought my offer of five hundred pounds for a bundle of Yankee overseas dollars rather rash; but this booklet will repay me nicely. I do believe I'll take it with me."

"You're getting Picadilly whores to pass scrip for you," I said. "Who's going to convert your rubles?"

Chalky shook his head. "Sergeant, it's horrible of you to suggest that I might sell these papers to the Russians. I'm taking them because I can never resist the temptation to nose about a bit when I've heard of a secret." He smiled. "Of course, were someone to offer me a fee to read over my shoulder . . ." Chalky tugged one sheet of the EWP book loose, folded it, and tucked it under his sweater. "A sample," he explained.

"Don't you run the risk of being hanged as a traitor?" I asked.

"Me? A traitor? Sergeant, for all we know this enterprise of ours may contribute no end to peace. We may all be on the side of the angels," Chalky said.

"The Reds get that, we may all be angels," I said.

Chalky fumbled in his coat pocket to get an opaque shopping bag, the sort British businessmen carry to pick up the groceries on their way home from the City. He flicked the bag open and dropped

the EWP book in the bottom. "Fill it up, if you please, Corporal McKey."

Jock glanced at me, ran his hand through his hair, and looked at Chalky's automatic as though judging the dimensions of the hole it could punch in him. Shrugging, he began to stack bundles of Military Scrip on top of the EWP. The sixty thousand-odd dollars filled Chalky's bag.

"Thank you, Jock," the dark man said, catching up the handles of the shopping bag and setting it behind him. He reached into his coat for his wallet. "I promised you five hundred pounds for this material. Here it is." Chalky unfolded five sheets of tissue-paper, hundred-pound notes the size of hand-towels. "I expect you two will find a way to divide this sum equitably," he said, letting the five big notes flutter down onto the bedspread. "Now, Jock, back away from me," Chalky ordered.

Jock came around to my side of the bed.

Chalky half-turned to pick up his shopping bag. Jock dipped his hand into my B-4, brought it out holding his Mauser.

As casually as he'd throw a dart at a board, Chalky fired. Jock, hit in the right shoulder, spun around. The Mauser dropped under the bed. His mouth open, Jock let himself down till he sat on the floor, watching blood blot into his uniform tunic.

"I'd best leave, in case the management here investigates the noise," Chalky said. "Sergeant Barnaby, I'll have your room key, please."

I took the key from my pocket and tossed it. Chalky's eyes went up to follow it. I leaped across the bed, aiming to tackle him at the waistline. Chalky dropped his gun as I rammed my skull into his ribs. He grabbed my head like a football—American-style—and carried it through to slam me on the floor by his feet. I kicked my heels up, aiming to do Chalky grievous bodily harm, connected, and scrambled under the bed to escape the retaliatory shoe aimed at my head. Chalky caught his shin on the iron bedframe, said a rather nasty word, and grabbed up his gun. An instant later he was outside, locking the door on us.

I squirmed out from under the bed, reflecting that my retreat there was not in the best traditions of heroism. I stood up. Jock was bleeding. I was dizzy as a champagne drunk. NATO's back door was wide open.

I didn't say anything to Jock. Why rub his nose in it? I tossed back the bedspread and tugged free the top edge of the sheet. With my pocketknife I sawed off a two-inch band of linen. Jock still sat by the bed, his right hand gripping his left shoulder to take the weight of his arm off the torn muscles. He moaned as I unbuttoned his

jacket. I cut away his right shirt-sleeve. There was only one hole in his shoulder, so presumably the bullet was still in there. Only a little blood oozed from the clotted jelly around the wound. Good deal. I wouldn't have known how to plug up a spurting bullet-wound. All I remember from first aid is snake-bites.

I took my scrap of the Imperial's sheet and wrapped it over Jock's shoulder and under his arm till the blood was all hidden. I went back to the bed to sawed off a square of sheet, and rigged up an untidy sling to hold up Jock's right arm. "Do you know a doctor, Jock?" I asked. "We need someone who won't be fussy about reporting bullet-wounds."

"I'm not the only Scot in London," Jock puffed.

"You make Scotland sound like a conspiracy," I said, rummaging in my B-4 bag for my bottle of that country's most respected product. I cut the tinfoil sheath around the cork and poured six ounces into a waterglass. I handed the Scotch to Jock and corked the bottle again to put it away. "I don't have aspirin," I told him. "This will have to do."

Jock drank the lot without stopping. Afterward, he sputtered half a minute. "Thanks, Slick," he whispered. "Hell of a note that I've got to be wounded before you'll buy me a drink."

"An expensive drink," I agreed. "Jock, where can I find that Chalky character?"

Jock stood, carefully, experimenting to see whether he could. He could. Glaswegians are made of catgut and bicycle chains. He sat against the sink. "He's usually at *The Friend at Hand,* a pub in Lambeth. Saloon bar, of course. He's a toff. His last name must be White; in the Forces everybody named White is nicknamed 'Chalky.' He's a receiver. That's all I know about him." Jock picked his RAF beret off the bed and set it on his head. "I must have been daft, to bring him in to muck up your scheme." Jock urged his uniform tunic over his right shoulder, keeping the wounded arm close to his chest.

"Don't give it another thought, Jock," I said. "You'll know better next payroll we hold up." I went over to look at the door White had locked on us. "We'll get this open and you to a doctor." I opened the screwdriver blade of my pocket-knife and unscrewed the faceplate over the keyhole. I don't know a damn thing about locks, but I could see the "T" of metal that held the bolt fast in the door. I wedged it out. The bolt fell to the floor. We were free, for the time being.

Okay. I glanced around. Clean up before we leave, I thought; clean up in a hurry and go. Less than half an hour earlier, this had been a standard London hotel

room, neat, clean, shabby. Now it looked lived in, maybe died in. I picked up Chalky's five big bills, folded them to three-inch squares, and deposited them behind the cigars in my shirt pocket. "I'm going to run Mr. White's five hundred quid back to him," I said.

Jock nodded without speaking, keeping his teeth tight together.

Gathering up the big paper sacks and the envelope whose secret was no longer safe, I stuffed this waste paper into my B-4 bag, on top of my money. I got the second Mauser, the one Jock had carried in the holdup and the one he'd got shot reaching for, checked the safety, and stuck it into my right hip pocket. I took five quid out and dropped the notes on the bed, hoping that a generous tip might persuade the maid not to call the manager about Jock's blood on the carpet or the half a sheet I'd stolen. I zipped my B-4 bag shut and hoisted it.

Carrying Jock's little suitcase as well as that pregnant blue bag of mine, I struggled to the elevator. I had Jock walk ahead of me so I could see whether or not he was still dripping blood. A pretty procession.

Down to the lobby, out the revolving door, we made it past the Imp Bar and around the corner. Out of sight of the Imperial, out of mind, too, I hoped. The fog was yellower now than it had been, enriched by anthracite smoke and the exhaust fumes of a million lorries. I staggered past the fat-bottomed cherubim honoring in bronze Lord Somebody I'd never heard of, and gratefully set the bags down to unlock my Ford. Jock's punctured arm couldn't feel worse than mine. I opened the door, hoisted the two bags into the back, and helped Jock to mount. He was halfway to dreamland, half shock, half the result of the medicine I'd given him in lieu of aspirin. Judging from the crooked smile with which Jock was regarding current events, he was feeling no pain. I tugged off my gloves and his and dropped them on the floor.

We drove back past the Imperial Hotel on our way to Jock's medic buddy at Middlesex Hospital. Two black limousines were drawing up there, to discharge a couple of civilians, a cluster of flat-hatted Volunteer Police, and two beetle-helmeted bobbies. Everything but Royal Canadian Mounted Police, I thought. And all because Jock had carelessly allowed himself to bleed on the carpet. I was glad we'd worn the gloves.

Jock's friend had a flat across the street from the Middlesex Hospital Nurses' Home. That guy must have had trouble keeping his mind on Anatomy. Or maybe not. "Are you sure he's the one who can patch you up, Jock?" I asked.

Jock crawled out, his left hand

tight on the handle of his suitcase full of money. "Ol' Harry Chisholm'll fix ol' Jock McKey, right as rain," he said. I judged that Jock was carrying enough anesthetic right now to take major surgery without a quiver. "Good ol' Harry!" Jock shouted. He tried to wave his right arm, and looked at it with surprise when it refused to wave.

"Be careful, Jock," I said.

"Always careful, Slick," he said. He staggered up to the door of Chisholm's flat and began to hammer at it with his left fist. I didn't want to be seen by yet another potential witness, so I left.

I found a red Post Office Telephone box and stopped to go inside and leaf through its library of London phonebooks. There were four listings under *The Friend at Hand*. I guessed that the one I wanted was the Friend with the LAMBeth exchange number. That one was in Old Paradise Street. Quaint name, I mused, getting back into the Ford to leaf through my *Geographia London Atlas*. According to the map, Old Paradise Street ran beside the gasworks. Quaint location.

I drove slowly, thinking bitter thoughts. What I'd planned as a quiet payroll robbery had blossomed out in wounded generals, Jock a casualty, samples of our Military Scrip tucked in the garters of every tart in Picadilly, and more than a bit of treason. For treason, men get stood against walls.

The Friend at Hand was across the Thames in that cluttered district where every fog seems to begin. Parking in front of the pub in Old Paradise Street, I was glad I'd got there in daylight. I locked up and entered the door marked SALOON.

The Saloon Bar of *The Friend at Hand* was a leathery, dusty, genteel cubbyhole. The publican was a gorilla who looked as though he'd had his last haircut for Elizabeth's Coronation. He shambled up to the bar to grin at me. "Watteryerev, Lofty?" he asked.

"Guinness," I said. "And get something for yourself, if you'd like."

"Oi'd loik," he admitted. He shuffled around out of sight, fought a bottle loose from its case, and came back to dump the Guinness into my glass. Dark foam spewed over the bar, which bothered him very little. He tipped a stern shot of gin into a glass, tinted it with lime, and looked at me again. "Thet's three bob, Yank," he said. I dropped two half-crowns on the bar. "Cheers," he said, grinning again, and tipped back his gin.

"Cheers." The stout tasted like condensed fog. I set my empty glass on the bar. "Where do I find Chalky White?"

The hairy hand fisted around my two coins. "Oi duhnnaw nafin abaht 'im," he said.

"He owes me fifty quid," I said. "You might promote yourself a piece of that if you'd tell me where to find him."

"Ain't too bloody likely Chalky'd 'eve aught t'do with a Yank," the publican said. "'e bloody 'ates Yanks."

I counted out five quid and splayed the notes under his nose. He took them.

"They's a school-'ouse in Lawn Lane, down by Vauxhall Bridge," he said. "Don't tell Chalky I'm 'oo marked 'im; but 'is flat is first floor, in the brick 'ouse next the school."

"Thanks a million, Pal," I said, wanting to sound properly American for the man.

I drove down the Embankment to Vauxhall, then across to Lawn Lane. The schoolhouse was across from a little park, an oasis in October. I parked and locked the car. I hated to leave all that money sitting on the floor in the back, but you can't make a nickel if you won't take a chance.

First floor, the publican had said. Translating from Bloke language, that meant upstairs. The front door of the brick house wasn't locked. I crept up the dark stairs, wishing my heels had been rubber. There were three doors at the landing. I stood before them, trying to decide which to kick in, when a phone rang behind the middle door. That would be the *Friend*'s publican, I guessed, calling White to play both sides for a gain. I took the chance. I turned the knob and slammed into the door with my shoulder, holding my Mauser level with where I remembered Chalky's middle to be.

White stood with his hand on the phone. I raised my gun till it pointed into his right eye and tapped my free hand over his pockets to make sure he wasn't wearing that little automatic of his. I kicked the door shut. "Have you found time to satisfy your furious curiosity, Mr. White?" I asked.

White sighed. "Sergeant, at this rate, you'll be all knocked out by evening. How did you happen to find me, by the way?"

"An anthropoid ape proved partial to bribes."

"That would be the ape at *The Friend at Hand*," White said. "I'll have to talk to him."

"Talk to me, first," I suggested. "Where are my papers?"

"I haven't an inkling," White said.

I tapped him on the cheek with the muzzle of the Mauser, just hard enough to make shaving a nuisance for a week or so. "I'd as soon hang for beating you to death," I told him, "as be shot for sending the Sargasso Plan to the Reds."

White switched off the smile. "You're too late," he said. "I gave your War Plan to a Mr. Malinkov not fifteen minutes ago."

Ripe for no levity, I tapped White over the left ear with the muzzle of the .32. The results were gratifying; a hammer couldn't have done better. White fell off balance like a dynamited oak. I caught him and laid him on the floor, face down.

White's shopping bag stood by the door. I dumped it on the floor. Nothing but money—our invasion money—inside. I reloaded the bag and stood it on the bureau for future reference.

Then the bureau. I tugged the drawers out and plowed through White's shirts and collars and socks. Nix. Covers off the bed. Nothing but bed. Except for the telephone directories, no books or magazines for the envelope to be hidden in. I took each of the four volumes of the phonebook by the spine and shook it. No papers fell out.

Just a big room, two lithographed pictures on the walls, a carpet with paths worn in its mangy nap . . . I stooped to run my fingers under one edge of the carpet. It was held to the floor by short-pointed tacks that easily pulled free. I followed the perimeter of the rug with my fingers till I raked across a free tack. There, under the carpet and under the bed, was my envelope. I got up. I'd been under more beds today than a Borgia courtier would average all week. I flipped through the Sargasso Plan booklet. Page twenty-two was missing. White's sample.

I rummaged through White's pockets, pleased during the search to find he was breathing. I'd never before laid a man out with a pistol-muzzle, and there'd been the chance of my therapy being too ardent for my patient's welfare. No papers on him. He'd gotten his sample to his prospective customer. I'd better get out before the prospect stopped by.

The telephone started another cycle of demanding rings. I picked it up. "White here," I clipped, trying to speak with White's Public-School crispness. My audience wasn't fooled. Whoever it was hung up without a word.

I tucked the EWP book inside my jacket, thumbed the Mauser to "safe," and put it back in my hip pocket. Taking White's five one-hundred-pound notes out of my shirt, I unfolded them and spread them on the floor beside their still unconscious owner. Then I hoisted the shopping bag full of scrip and left.

What a screwed-up mess! I thought, unlocking the Ford. Or, in the gentler phrase of Miss Tinkham, my third-grade teacher, "What a tangled web we weave, when first we pract-tize to deceive!" Yes, Teacher.

My web was a snarl for sure. So far my nestegg for Anne had bought three casualties and an international crisis, and it wasn't

noon yet. All I'd wanted was insurance against Anne's ever being poor, ever having to learn leftover cookery or how to wear a cloth coat a year longer than cloth coats are good for. My hopes for Anne had gotten Air Force Intelligence hot on my tail, that was certain; maybe New Scotland Yard was after me to boot. I pulled the Sargasso Sector EWP from under my jacket and stuffed it into my B-4 bag. I zipped open the bag's midsection, opening it like a giant clam, and dumped the scrip from White's bag into mine. I zipped the bag shut and started the car.

Across the bridge, then, and past Buckingham Palace to Knightsbridge and points west. Anne's TWA plane was due at Heathrow in two and a half hours. It would take me just about that long to make the twelve miles. The fog was a yellow jelly that hid every pedestrian till he was under my front bumper, made every intersection a hand of Russian roulette. Anne's plane would be talked down on Ground Control Approach.

I made the field at a sizzling six miles an hour and no pedestrian bloodshed. That left me half an hour to sit at the bar that supposedly overlooks London Airport. The place could have been sunk in mud for all that could be seen today. I sipped the gin-and-French compounded for me by the bartender who understands Dry Martini and listened to the chatter of my nerves.

Finally, the loudspeaker hummed and came to life. "The Trans-World Airlines flight from New York City is now landing. Passengers may be met at the rear of the Customs Shed, ground floor, opposite Gate Five." I scampered down to Gate Five.

Like cattle arriving at Chicago, the passengers from America were being herded through chickenwire runways past their processers. I saw Anne, just inside the building, squinting her eyes against the fog. She was wrapped in a blue suede coat with the big collar tucked up against the back of her head. Even at two hundred yards, Anne was as beautiful as the princess of a fairy tale.

I did a broken-field run through the small-fry luggage stacked on painted squares and leaned across the chickenwire in open defiance to the rules of international air traffic. Grabbing Anne's arm, I pulled her over to kiss her. Anne rubbed her eyes clear of smog to identify her admirer. Her first words to me in a year were, "I haven't been through Customs, yet, Barney."

"There's no duty on what I took," I said, taking another. "Hurry, Darling."

"I'll hurry."

A uniformed official was hurrying toward me, disapproval shown by the thin mouth below his

moustache. I retreated to the native end of the Customs Shed.

I took Anne's luggage to the Ford. Then we went up to make sure that my Martini man was consistent. With Anne's hand in mine, my nerves stopped strumming. The weight of the world rested for the moment on someone else.

Anne smiled at me as I toasted her. "You're different," she said.

"I'm a year older than I was when the *Darby* sailed," I said. "You look about sixteen, yourself."

"I felt forty, without you," Anne said. "What's our place in Staines like?"

"Tiny," I said. "Maybe lonely. Chilly."

"We'll have a fireplace, with a rug lying in front of it?"

"All British homes have fireplaces," I told Anne. "And bearskin rugs are required by the British building code."

"Good," Anne said. "I like it lonely and chilly, if you're there, and we've got a fireplace."

We took our time getting home. Anne rested her head on my left shoulder, not saying a word. The fog outside the car windows sealed us off from the world in a bubble of our own.

Halfway to Staines, we stopped at a village pub named *The Adam and Eve* for lunch: overplump sausages baked into rolls, sandwiches of mousetrap Swiss, big mugs of the bittersweet beer that tastes its best on a bleak and foggy day. Anne looked around the *Adam and Eve,* to the thick rafters studded with horse-brasses, the genteel dust lurking above feather-duster level, the coals grumbling and shifting about in the flames of the big fireplace. "I'm going to like living in England," she said.

"I think I'm going to begin enjoying it, too," I said.

We got to Staines as the street-lamps were switching on, burning lemon-colored halos in the fog. I parked our car in front of our gate, at 72A, Avondale Road.

"The Thames is a block away," I told Anne. "King John signed the Magna Charta a few minutes from here. You're in the heart of England, Anne." I took her hand and led her to the door. She stopped, refusing to go in. "What's the matter?"

"You've got to carry me into our new home," she ordered. I opened the door to show her the stairway. Anne shook her head. Feeling like a married man again, subject to ultimatums, I bent to grab Anne under the knees. She put her arms around my neck and I clumped up the twenty-seven steps with her in my arms.

The flat was chilly. It smelled of the Thames, a fog-smell. I set Anne in the wing-backed chair by the cold fireplace, got a blanket from our bedroom, and covered her to the chin. Kneeling, I balled up *The News of the World,*

shingled paraffine-soaked firelighters above it, and dusted coal over the top. I lit the paper and spread a sheet of newspaper across the mouth of the fireplace like a sail, to force a draft through the coal. In three minutes the warmth reached two yards into the room. I took my bows from Anne, then trotted down to get our luggage.

When I got back, Anne was staring into the fireplace. "I'm disloyal," she said, throwing off the blanket to come and sit beside me on the rug. "I like this better than California sunshine."

Then we didn't say anything for a long while that wasn't said for us by the pressure of our hands together.

"A penny," Anne said, returning to words.

"I was wondering whether that blue negligee I sent you was too small," I grinned.

"Wait a minute," Anne said, jumping up and kicking off her shoes. Snatching up her overnight case, she padded into the bedroom to change. "It's cold in here!" she shouted.

"I'll come in and . . ."

"Stay out!" Anne giggled.

I glanced at my B-4 bag. I'd rather Anne didn't see the waste paper I'd carried here from London. I zipped the bag open and tossed the crumpled paper bags and envelopes into the fireplace. Then the military scrip. I broke the bundles rapidly and scattered the bills over the flames. They burned quickly, all sixty thousand dollars of them, and the room got suddenly warm.

There was still the Sargasso Sector Emergency War Plan, that mimeographed booklet the size of a paper-back reprint. Should I burn it or send it back to my bosses? If I were to return it, they'd have the postmark, maybe other clues to trace it to me. But if I burned it, the USAF would never stop looking for it, and me. There were the Mausers to get rid of, too. The Thames would hide them, I decided. What about the EWP?

The solution was postponed by the doorbell. There was a loud silence from the bedroom. Then, "Who is that, Barney?" Anne called quietly.

"Don't know," I admitted. "Stay put for a minute. I'll see."

"I'll freeze!"

"And I'll thaw you out," I promised. I rolled the Sargasso papers into a tight cylinder, shook the coal to one side of the scuttle, and thrust the plan out of sight. I got the little Mauser from the B-4 bag, wrapped it in a sheet of newspaper, and buried it in the coal beside the EWP.

"What are you hiding?" Anne asked, looking from the bedroom.

"Don't worry your head, Anne," I said.

I hammered down to the outer door and opened it.

Two men, stocky, dressed in Dollar-Day suits and mudstained windbreakers waited outside.

"I'm Captain Ilf; this is Lieutenant Petrov," the man who wore pink-tinted glasses said. "We're from the Air Force. May we come in?"

Looking at the pistol in Ilf's right hand I decided this was the foregonest conclusion of the week. I led the way upstairs, wondering how long Ilf had been in England to pick up that BBC accent of his. As they clumped up the stairs after me, I discovered how a prisoner feels with guards at his back.

Anne had come out by the fire, to sit huddled under her blanket in the wing-back chair. The blue-froth fringe of her negligee showed by her ankle. Our visitors glanced at Anne, then to me, in a silent tribute to my taste and luck.

"These men are Air Force officers, Anne," I said. I turned to the man wearing tinted glasses, Captain Ilf. "How did you find me?" I asked him.

"We just followed the chain," he said. "Mr. White told us where to find Corporal McKey. Corporal McKey, under stress, told us where to look for you. Three links. Now the fourth, if you please. The papers, Sergeant Barnaby."

"My leave papers?" I asked.

"Don't play idiot!" Captain Ilf snapped. He reached into his coat pocket and handed me a folded sheet of paper. I recognized it at once as the page twenty-two of the EWP that Chalky White had taken as his "sample." "We'll have the rest, now," the captain said.

I finally understood who these men were. I understood now why Ilf spoke with that peculiarily-tinted British accent. "You're not from the USAF," I said.

"I didn't specify which Air Force we represent," Ilf reminded me. "If you'll give me the papers now, Sergeant, we'll leave you to your lovely wife."

"The Sargasso papers are down in my car," I said.

"Nonsense!" Ilf snapped. "No one would leave something so valuable outside overnight."

"Suit yourself, comrade," I said.

Anne wrapped the blanket tighter around her and stood to face my interviewer. "Maybe you'd best explain this to me," she said.

Ilf nodded. "Quite so. Your husband, Mrs. Barnaby, stole a large amount of money together with some secret papers. We're willing to overlook the money, but we must recover those papers."

"For the Red Air Force," I said.

"I daresay our chaps need the Sargasso Plan as badly as yours do," Ilf said. "Your part in our search, Sergeant, will be to stand quite still."

At this note of menace Petrov, the second Russian, brought out his pistol, too.

"The papers aren't up here. They're in my car." I insisted.

"Open the blue zipper-bag, Petrov," Ilf said, pointing to my B-4 bag. Petrov zipped open the sidepockets of the bag. He stuck his gun into his pocket and grabbed out packages of pound-notes. When all the money was on the floor, Petrov glanced at Ilf, his eyebrows inquiring about it. "We want only the papers, Petrov," his chief repeated. Petrov shoved the money aside like a good Communist and burrowed through the cigars to the bottom of the bag's pockets.

"It's not there," I repeated. Once I got these two out into the street, away from Anne, I could fight, force them to shoot, anything that would bring the police. Anything but let them tote the Sargasso Sector EWP home to Moscow. Anything but let them hurt Anne. "The papers you want are in my car."

Petrov stood up, persuaded by my stubborness. "He may be telling the truth, Semyon Semyonovich."

"Sergeant Barnaby has a poor reputation in regard to the truth," Ilf answered. He tugged a handkerchief from his coat-sleeve and removed his glasses to polish them, the pistol wobbling in his busy hand. "Sergeant," he said, "you can't imagine how greatly Mr. White's sample page whetted our appetites for the entire Sargasso EWP. We want it. We'll have it. Don't lie to me, Sergeant." He set the pink-tinted glasses on his nose again. "I might even be persuaded to injure your lovely wife, if I thought doing so would further our purpose."

"Touch Anne and I'll feed you that damned gun!"

Ilf smiled. "I do believe I've trod on your Achilles' heel," he said. "Petrov, stand behind the girl." The lieutenant tore his gaze away from the money cascading onto the floor and walked over behind Anne's chair. "Do you still have that claspknife of yours, Boris Mikhailovich?"

"The damned War Plan is in my car," I shouted.

"Do you guarantee that, Sergeant?" Ilf inquired. "I ask because, should your assurances prove false, Petrov will be forced to perform his bit of minor surgery." To illustrate his willingness to do so, Petrov clicked open his pocketknife and held the blade an inch from the side of Anne's face. Holding the gun in his left hand, Petrov grinned at me.

"You'll get the EWP," I promised, stepping up to Ilf till the nose of his pistol touched my chest. Petrov raised his pistol to cover me. "Get that goon of yours away from Anne," I growled. "If either of you touches her, you'll have to shoot me. Half the people in Staines will hear your shot and come running."

Ilf smiled. "No one would dream of being so inquisitive, Sergeant

Barnaby," he said. "The Englishman is a man who minds his own business. I could machine-gun both of you at my leisure, and no neighbor would intrude his curiosity. Let's go to your car." Ilf waved his partner to the doorway and turned to Anne. "Let the telephone be, Mrs. Barnaby. Any calls you make can only result in your husband's being shot, or at the very least being forced to spend the rest of his youth in prison. You'd not like that, would you?"

"I won't phone," Anne answered.

Ilf nodded to his companion. In the instant the Russian Captain's attention was off me, I looked my wife square in the eyes, glanced at the coal-scuttle, from there to the fireplace. Anne nodded. She'd seen me hiding something under the coal. She understood. After we'd leave the room, she'd dig out the EWP and throw it into the fire.

"Follow Petrov," Ilf ordered me. He slipped his gun into his pocket, but kept his hand in with it. The stairs were steep, and the Russians had neglected to switch on the light. Petrov stepped down carefully, like a child, not sure of his footing in the darkness. "Hurry, Boris!" Ilf snapped.

I hurried Boris. I booted the small of his back with all my strength. Seizing the railing to keep from following him down, I then flattened myself against the right wall to miss the bullet Ilf was sure to send at me. But Ilf didn't fire.

Petrov hit just once, jack-knifing and landing on his shoulders. It sounded like a meat-ax hitting him.

Ilf pressed his pistol to the back of my neck. "Down, Sergeant," he said. I went down, stepping over Petrov, huddled at the bottom step.

The fog came in when I opened the outside door, and started up the stairs behind us.

"Give me your car-keys," Ilf ordered. I took my keys from my pocket and tossed them to him. Ilf snatched them from the air without taking his eyes off of me. "Carry Boris out to the car," he said.

"He may have a broken back," I protested. "It might kill him to move him."

"Carry him out," Ilf repeated.

Petrov was huddled against the stairs, sobbing in pain. I bent, placed his wrists together and put his arms onto my shoulder. "This may kill him," I said again.

"Any hesitation will kill you, Sergeant," Ilf said.

I heaved Petrov off the floor. He screamed once. He was quite silent as I carried him through the gate. Ilf unlocked the car door and tipped the seat forward. I worked Petrov onto the back seat as gently as I could.

"If you'd helped me, he might have had a chance," I accused Ilf.

"Petrov is a soldier," Ilf said.

"Where is the Sargasso Plan?"

"In the dash-cubby."

"Open it, Sergeant."

I bent over the glove compartment and punched the button. Inside, under the envelope that held my leave papers, was my Mauser, twin to the one upstairs in the coal-scuttle. If I could get that automatic out, I'd give another Russian an evening to remember. I let the door drop and wrapped my fingers around the little gun, thumbing the safety off.

"Hand it to me," Ilf ordered, holding his angular pistol a foot from my side.

I reached toward him with the envelope of my leave papers, the .32 hidden beneath them.

He must have seen it in my eyes. My finger was tight on the trigger, the slack drawn up, when Ilf knocked the envelope aside with his gunhand, tossing the Mauser from me. "You stupid ass!" he swore, bringing his automatic back, getting ready to hit me in the head with it.

"Barney!" Anne shouted from the doorway.

Ilf twisted to see her. Anne lifted Jock's Mauser in both hands and fired twice. Ilf fired only once before I clubbed him down.

"Anne!" I bellowed, trying to run toward her, to shield her with myself. But she was falling, letting the blanket drop from her shoulders.

Ilf was on me. I got my right forearm against his throat, twisted him around, got my knee into the middle of his back. My body was a vise now, intent on squeezing the life from this man. Ilf still managed to raise his head, shoot out his arms toward the automatic that lay on the sidewalk. I slammed his forehead against the cobblestones. After a while I stopped. Ilf wasn't resisting any more.

I stumbled to the gate, unlocked it, and knelt by the barefoot figure lying on the brick path. Jock's gun, the one Anne had dug out of the coal-scuttle together with the EWP, was still in her hands. Annes' slim fingers were smudged with coal dust.

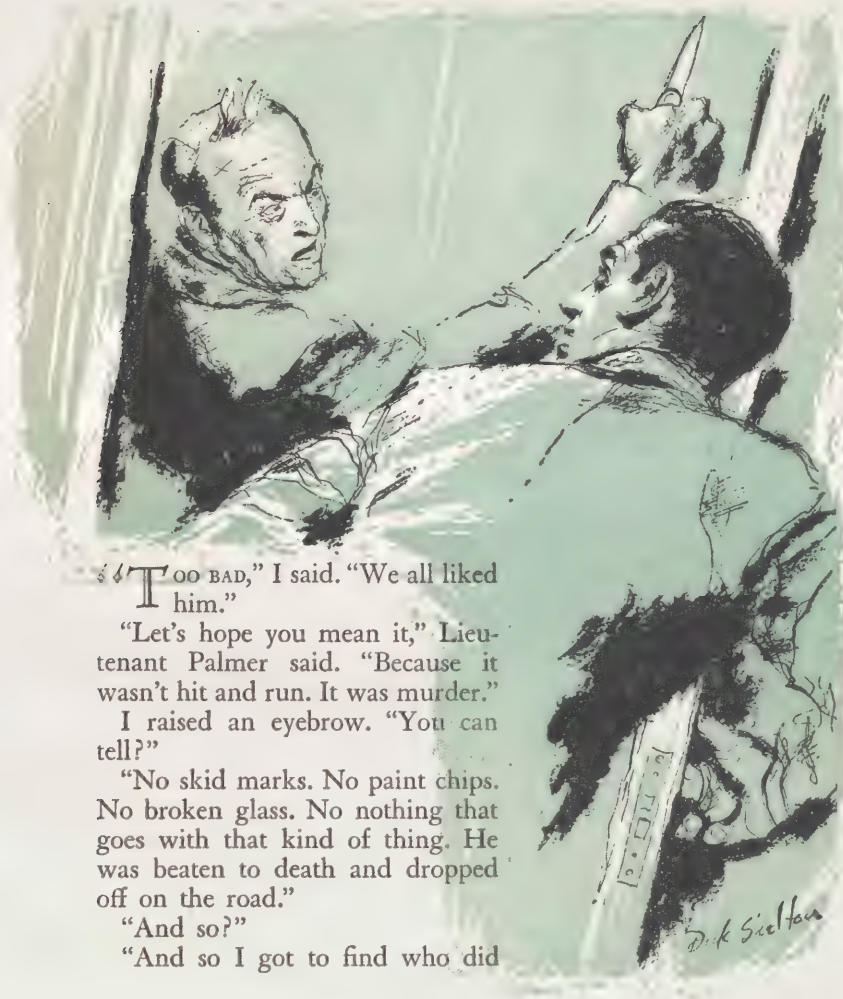
Tucking the red blanket around her, I carried my wife upstairs again. The fire was dying; the room smelled of fog as it had before. The nagging racket of the police-bell came through the open doors, and there were voices from where Ilf's body lay beside the gate.

I dampened a cloth to wipe the coal dust from Anne's hands. It was the only thing I could do for her.

The Partners

Got to be careful whom you kill. Could be you need a bookkeeper more than a partner.

BY JACK RITCHIE



"TOO BAD," I said. "We all liked him."

"Let's hope you mean it," Lieutenant Palmer said. "Because it wasn't hit and run. It was murder."

I raised an eyebrow. "You can tell?"

"No skid marks. No paint chips. No broken glass. No nothing that goes with that kind of thing. He was beaten to death and dropped off on the road."

"And so?"

"And so I got to find who did

it and why. This is one of the places I look." His eyes went over the three of us. "You three own this big, swanky nightclub?"

"That's right," I said. "Partners. Eddie Fletcher, Louie Nicolle and me. Danny Neil."

Lieutenant Palmer was a sandy-haired man with shrewd blue eyes, "What was Harold Romaine around here?"

"He was our bookkeeper," Louie Nicolle said. Louie's short heavy body was wedged between the arms of the gray leather chair. The rings on his fingers glistened as he brought the scotch and soda to his lips.

Lieutenant Palmer smiled thinly. "I always got my suspicions about bookkeepers. There could be something that smells in that direction."

Eddie Fletcher toyed nervously with his cigarette case. "Nothing at all there. He was as honest as they come."

Palmer still smiled. "You don't mind if I have your books checked? I might find that one or all three of you had a good motive for getting rid of him."

I returned his smile. "Not at all, Lieutenant. Any time."

"Maybe it was someone in his personal life," Louie said.

Palmer closed his notebook. "We're checking."

"Poor Harry," I said. "Any relatives?"

"None that we know of except his father. I already talked to the old boy, but he wasn't much help. He's not quite all in order between the ears."

Palmer put the notebook in his pocket. "About those books. I'll have somebody sent over later today. I like to be thorough." He opened the door and paused. "By the way, where were the three of you early this morning? Say between two and seven?"

"The three of us were playing poker," Eddie said. "Right here in this club until nearly eight."

"That's nice," Palmer said, nodding his head. "And probably not one of you even left to go to the can. Good bladders." He waggled a few fingers in goodbye. "I'll be back."

Eddie went to the corner bar and made himself another stiff drink. "You sure it won't show up in the books?" he asked.

"No," I said. "If Harry could do anything, he could keep books. It won't show."

Louie spoke around his cigar. "How much do you think he took us for before we caught on?"

"It's hard to say," I said. "Not less than twenty-five G's. Could be as much as fifty."

"The bastard," Louie growled.

Eddie turned to me. "You could of made it look better."

I shrugged my shoulders. "You guys were all hot and bothered for a rush job," I said. "Besides, it was getting daylight and I had to get rid of the body."

"I wonder if he really spent it," Louie said. "You think maybe it's stashed away somewhere?"

"You heard him keep squealing that it was the horses," I said. "We'll just have to believe that."

Maxie, the head waiter, knocked on the door and poked his head in. "Some old gent wants to see you. Any one of you. I think he's Harry's old man."

"Let's see what he looks like," I said.

Maxie had a surprised expression on his face when he came back with Harry's father. He slid the .45 across the desk to me.

I extracted the full chip from the automatic and then looked at Harry's father. Mr. Romaine was a small, frail man with silver hair and blue eyes that blinked often.

He looked about the room. "Fine," he said. "It would have been fine. All three of you here."

"All right, Pop," I said. "Tell us all about it."

His wild eyes met mine. "I don't know which one of you it was," he said in a high uncertain voice. "I don't know which one of you killed him, but I know you're all guilty."

I studied him. "Why should we be guilty of anything?"

"Because you knew what Harry was doing," he said. "He told me all about it when he thought you knew." He smiled slyly. "But I didn't tell the lieutenant. I want to take care of this myself."

He looked down at the gun on my desk. "I'll use something else," he said. "I'll use something else to kill all three of you."

I got to my feet. "You're going home now, Pop, and get some rest. You'll feel better tomorrow." I took hold of his arm at the elbow and steered him toward the door.

Behind me Louie spoke softly. "How much was it, Pop?"

The old man twisted his head as I shoved him through the door. "Thirty-one thousand," he said, and his laugh was almost a giggle. "Thirty-one thousand dollars."

"The bastard," Louie muttered under his breath. "The dirty crooked bastard."

Outside the office we stepped aside to let Jean Taylor pass. Jean has flowing gold hair and gray eyes that remain perpetually quiet and unsurprised. She is part of the floor show and she sings songs that are as simple and restrained as she is.

She stopped to look at the old man and then at me. "Be careful with him," she said. "Don't hurt him."

I smiled. "I won't disturb a feather in his head," I said. "I'm only showing him how to find the back door." I took Harry's father into the alley and pointed him toward the street. "Run along now and get some sleep. I know it's hit you pretty hard, but don't let it give you any bad ideas."

Jean was still standing where we'd met her in the corridor when

I came back. "What did he want?" she asked.

"Harry's father," I said. "He didn't get what he wanted."

She tilted her serious face slightly. "I'm still curious."

"Something to do with Harry," I said.

"What about Harry?"

"I guess you haven't heard yet," I said. "Harry got himself killed last night."

She looked deep into my eyes.

"Yes," I said. "Murdered." I patted her lightly on the head. "Don't take it so hard. We can always get another bookkeeper."

After we closed the club, I went to my apartment and slept until two in the afternoon. I'd just finished shaving and was using the after-shaving lotion when the buzzer sounded. I grabbed a cigarette on the way to the door.

"Come on in, Lieutenant," I said. "Care for some coffee?"

"No," Palmer said and took a seat in the arm chair. He pursed his lips for a moment before he spoke. "I came to bring you the news. Louie Nicolle got his throat cut at about eleven this morning."

I thought about it and got to my feet. "Just a second," I said. I went into the kitchen, poured myself coffee and cream and brought it back into the living room.

He watched me. "Are you sure you're interested?"

"I could cry," I said. "But not until I've had my coffee."

Palmer seemed about to continue and then it looked like he thought of something else. He cocked his head. "What happens to Louie's share of the club now?"

"It goes to Eddie and me," I said. "The setup is now fifty-fifty." I sipped the coffee. "I was sleeping alone at eleven this morning," I said. "Should I phone a lawyer?"

Slowly he unwrapped a cigar. "No, you don't need a lawyer or an alibi. We know who did it and we got a witness."

"You could have said that right at the beginning," I said.

"For some reason I like to see you worried," Palmer said. "Not that you show it, but I know it's there." He sucked on his cigar until it was lit. "Around eleven this morning, a chamber maid was at one of the linen closets in the hall near Louie's door. She saw a little old man buzz Louie's door. When Louie opened the door, the little gent whipped out a sharp knife." Palmer drew his finger across his throat. "Just like that. No fuss, no bother, no talk."

"Are you sure you don't want coffee?" I asked.

Palmer rubbed the side of his face as he watched me. "And then the little man calmly wipes his knife on Louie's shirt and quietly walks away while Louie is still kicking."

Palmer sighed. "By the time the maid believes her eyes and makes a noise, he's disappeared down the stairs and out the front door. We're

still looking for him."

"I hope you get him, Lieutenant," I said.

"Thanks," he said dryly. "A little old man, about five foot two. Gray hair and blue eyes. Does that strike a note?"

"Nothing at all," I said.

"It was a whole melody to me," Palmer said. "Seeing as how I'd had a conversation with a man of that description just recently."

I nodded.

Palmer went on. "I went to see Harry Romaine's father. Nobody home. The door happens to be unlocked and so naturally I check for burglars. When I leave, I have a couple of old man Romaine's photographs in my pocket. The maid does a positive identification."

He crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair. "There must be something you forgot to tell me the last time we met."

"Sorry, Lieutenant. I can't think of a thing."

Palmer stared at the ceiling. "Fifty-fifty now," he said thoughtfully. He got to his feet. "Anyway, I hope you think enough of Louie to give him a nice funeral."

When he was gone, I went to the phone and called Eddie Fletcher. "Palmer been there yet?" I asked.

"No," Eddie said nervously. "What for should he want to see me?"

"Louie got his throat cut this morning," I said. "Harry's father did the job and he's still loose."

I could almost see Eddie sweating and I smiled. "Relax," I said. "The cops will get him sooner or later. In the meantime make sure you know who it is when you answer the door."

I went back into the kitchen and had some more coffee and toast. It wasn't a bad deal at that, I thought. With Louie gone, that made me about fifteen grand a year richer. The coffee ttasted good.

At seven in the evening I was getting ready to go to the club when the buzzer sounded again. I started for the door and then stopped as I thought of Louie. Better to be careful than to be suddenly dead, I said to myself. I wrapped a suitcoat around my left forearm and held it near my throat as I opened the door.

For an old man, he could still move fast. If my arm hadn't been up there he would have got me. But as it was, he just sliced through the coat and nicked my hand a little.

He was pulling back for another try when I got his wrist. I pulled him into the room and twisted his arm until he sank to his knees. The knife slipped out of his grip and thudded to the rug.

I jerked him to his feet and got ready to give him a good going over. He looked at me with those mild watery eyes and I saw that he was about as far off his rocker as you could get. He didn't have enough sense left to tie his shoe

laces, and the only thing his mind was working on was the idea of killing me and Eddie.

To start off with, I let him have an easy right to the chin. He must have been weaker than I thought, because that took the light out of his eyes and he collapsed. I kicked him in the ribs as he lay on the floor, but it was unnecessary, for he was out cold.

I was reaching for the knife, when the idea flickered in my mind. I left the knife there and lit a cigarette. After a few slow puffs, I bent down again and picked the knife up, being careful not to touch the handle.

I put the knife in an empty half gallon milk bottle, wrapped that in a towel and put it in a shoe box.

Then I went into the bathroom and got a couple of sleeping tablets. I dissolved them in warm milk and waited until the old man came to. While he was still blinking, I put the glass to his lips and he drank automatically, like a child.

He got to his feet and I pushed him onto the davenport. He tried to get up, but I kept my hand on his chest until the pills took effect. When he was asleep, I left the apartment with the shoe box.

It was quiet beyond the door when I pushed the buzzer to Eddie's apartment. "It's all right," I said. "It's only me."

The door opened to the length of its chain while Eddie made absolutely sure. When he let me in, I saw a bottle on the table and Eddie had the smell of its contents on his breath. I put the shoe box beside the bottle.

Eddie licked his lips. "I'm not coming to the club tonight. I'm staying here until they find that crazy old coot."

"Good idea," I said. "You got to be careful."

"Maybe we ought to tell Palmer that Harry's old man is out to get all of us."

"Then he'd want to know why," I said.

Eddie fidgeted and then thought of pouring himself another drink.

I waited for him to finish and to put down the glass. When Eddie's eyes shifted away from me I slammed a hard right to his chin. I was ready to do more if that wasn't enough, but Eddie dropped and lay still.

I went into the kitchen for a knife. I turned Eddie on his back, and in a moment, being careful not to get any blood on me, it was done.

I washed the knife carefully and put it back in the kitchen. Then I opened the shoebox and got out the knife. Being careful not to get my prints on it, I put some blood on the blade and put it beside Eddie. On the way downstairs, I dropped the milk bottle and the wrappings into the incinerator.

After the first floor show, I spoke to Jean. She was wearing silver lame that clung to her like a

hungry lover, tight and intimate.

"Honey," I said. "Sometimes I get the feeling that I've just got to have company after we close up."

When Jean looked at you, there were times when you wondered whether she was looking deep into your mind. "Sometimes I get that feeling too," she said. She regarded me soberly. "All right," she added, "you tell me what it's going to be."

"Your last show is at one," I said. "I'll knock off around midnight and go back to my apartment to change my shirt and then I'll be at your place at about two."

She looked into the distance and then back at me. "Two hours to change a shirt?"

I quit earlier than twelve because I was getting worried that Harry's father might wake up. I got back to my apartment at eleven thirty and used plenty of caution when I opened the door. I didn't want him waiting for me with another knife. But I had nothing to worry about. He was still stretched out on the davenport, breathing like one who's deep in sleep.

I looked down at him and thought for a moment that it might be better if I got rid of him permanently, but I changed my mind. He might babble to Palmer about the thirty-one thousand, but it would be the word of a loony against mine.

I went to the phone and got in touch with Homicide and Lieutenant Palmer.

"If you're still looking for old man Romaine," I told him, "you can stop. He's here in my apartment."

Over the phone I heard the sound of chair legs scraping and I guessed my words must have made him sit up.

"Be damn careful," he said. "The guy's nuts and dangerous."

"Not right now," I said. "He's asleep."

I went to the kitchen and got a knife. I put his fingerprints on it and added a few of mine. I put the knife on a table. I got a cold wet cloth from the bathroom and used it on his face until I got him back to consciousness.

He was still groggy when Palmer came with two plainclothes men.

"There he is," I said. "I opened the door and he took a swipe at me." I pointed to the knife. "I got nicked a little and had to put him to sleep."

Romaine was handcuffed then and the two detectives had to practically carry him.

Palmer's eyes followed the departing detectives. "I'd give a lot to know how much of what he'll say will be sane." He shrugged and went to the door. "This ought to make the other half of your fifty-fifty deal calm down. He was pretty jumpy when I saw him yesterday."

"I'm sure it will," I said. "Eddie likes security."

I got to Jean's apartment as fast as I could after they'd gone.

Her gray eyes went over me and she smiled ever so slightly. "You seem pleased with yourself," she said.

"I feel like I look," I said.

I sat down while she went into the kitchenette to mix drinks. When she handed me mine, I drank deeply with satisfaction.

She sat on the hassock, watching me. "Tell me about it," she said. "I'd like to know just what it is that can make you happy."

I rattled the ice cubes in my glass and drained about half of what was left. "Harry's old man tried to kill me this morning."

"I was wondering if he would," she said.

She watched my hand as I loosened my tie.

"I took away his sticker," I said. "And turned him over to the police." I yawned. "I had a hard day, baby." I stretched out my legs. "You know, now that I think of it, Harry was kind of a queer duck too. It must run in the family. I don't think he ever even went out with dames."

"The quiet type," she said. "Sometimes they give that impression."

"And yet that quiet bastard . . ." I stopped and grinned sleepily. "How about sitting here next to me, honey?"

"And yet?" she asked, her eyes intent on my face. "What were you going to say?"

"Nothing," I said and closed my eyes. I felt relaxed—cozy.

"And yet that quiet bastard managed to steal thirty-one thousand dollars from you. Is that what you were going to say?"

I opened my eyes. "Who have you been talking to?"

Her face looked blurred to me. "We were going to make it fifty, Danny," she said. "An even fifty thousand dollars before we left."

It seemed to take me a while to understand what she was saying. "You and Harry?"

"Me and Harry," she said. "My husband and I."

I could feel myself sweating with the effort of trying to get to my feet. I didn't make it. "That drink . . ."

"And now I have thirty-one thousand dollars," she said. "But I don't have Harry."

I tried to shake the fog out of my head, but I was doing it slowly and it didn't work at all.

"I think Harry's father had the right idea about the way to do it," Jean said quietly. "Sleeping pills are too easy for you."

I heard her get to her feet. "It's going to be you now," she said. "And then I'm going to kill Eddie."

In the wild part of my mind, that seemed funny. She was going to kill Eddie. I let the laugh come to my lips.

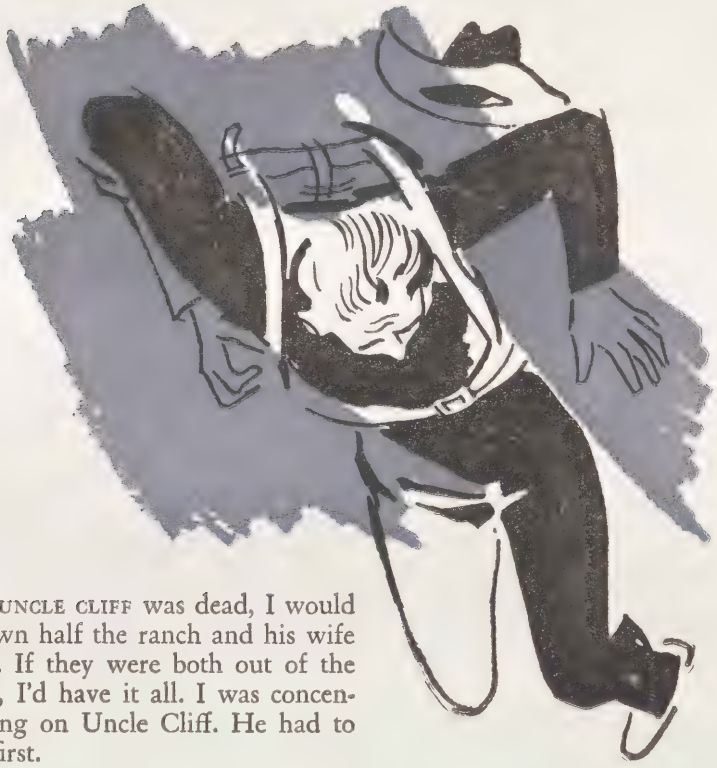
It stayed there until I heard her in the kitchen opening a drawer, the rattle of cutlery.

Then I stopped laughing.

Reach for the Clouds

The young wife needed loving, and the husband killing. Dave was exactly the boy to handle both, perfectly.

BY BOB BRISTOW



IF UNCLE CLIFF was dead, I would own half the ranch and his wife half. If they were both out of the way, I'd have it all. I was concentrating on Uncle Cliff. He had to go first.

We sat at the breakfast table, the three of us, having a last cup of coffee before going out. I kept

trying to figure the setup, to get it perfect.

Over a month ago, I had been called to the ranch by my uncle. He had a peptic ulcer and needed help. I was in New York having a good time. I hadn't been back to the ranch in five years, not even a year ago when Uncle Cliff had married.

The telegram said to come, that Uncle Cliff needed rest and I could help run the ranch. I had no choice. He had been footing my bills for the last few years. I loaded everything into my two seat plane and flew off to Texas and dear old Uncle Cliff. His full name was Clifford Fields. He had owned the ranch for years, even before I was born. He became my guardian when my parents were killed in an automobile accident. I was his only living relative except, of course, his new wife.

I had landed on a small level strip near the ranch house. Uncle Cliff was there to meet me. He had changed, but then I hadn't seen him for over five years. The change was startling. His face was wrinkled, his eyes tired. His hair was nearly white and it was obvious that Uncle Cliff was failing rapidly. And that rang a bell with me, because somebody was going to own that 20,000 acre ranch before long. Uncle Cliff was going to his reward, and I figured, in his will, to own half the ranch.

We went inside the house. Uncle Cliff's wife, Anita, was standing there looking at me, slowly, carefully. I have never been so surprised. I switched a quick glance at Uncle Cliff to see if he had noticed. He hadn't. Anita was probably thirty, very dark eyes, brown hair and smooth, smooth legs. She appeared infinitely graceful. Anita was a *very* attractive woman.

I was not asleep. Why, Dave? I asked myself. Why did she marry him? Uncle Cliff was in his sixties and you don't have to know much about women to know that Uncle Cliff wasn't doing much for Anita. This kid was smart . . . and she was out to nail down a good hunk of that ranch for her own. I began to study her.

Everything went fine for about a month. I played the good little nephew, skipping around doing odd jobs for Uncle Cliff. I was a whiz. I mended fences, drove cattle, kept the ranch on a nice even keel. Anita noticed it. She told me how glad she was that I had come to make it easier for Uncle Cliff. That she said. But those dark eyes were hiding something deep and strange. I couldn't quite make it out.

One morning Uncle Cliff went to see the doctor. Seems like his ulcer had improved magnificently since I had come. Sure. All he needed was someone to take the load off his shoulders. Obviously, that didn't help my plan any . . . not any at all.

That's when it came to me . . . that morning sitting there over breakfast coffee.

"I've got to go to town for some medicine," Uncle Cliff said. "Will you stay around the house and keep Anita company?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Sure," I said. I glanced at Anita. In her eyes I saw a little glimmer of fear, of uncertainty. I looked away. *What was it? Was she afraid of me? Why?* I hadn't given any signs of . . .

Uncle Cliff went to the door. "I'll see you later," he said.

There we were, sitting across the table from each other. Anita stared at her plate for a long time. She didn't want to look up. I could feel it. But she did. I was taking it in. *What is it, woman? What are you afraid of? What's driving you?*

She glanced away quickly. "I'd better clear the dishes away," she said.

"I'll help you," I answered. For a moment she stopped, as though to protest, but she didn't. She just stood there breathing heavily, her breasts rising and falling spasmodically, her mouth twitching. Then she spun around quickly, not wanting me to see. She tied an apron around her waist and started the water.

I carried a stack of dishes to the sink and dropped them. I stood close behind her, so close I could feel her warm hair against my face. She had her hands in the soapy water but I knew she wasn't washing the dishes. She was just standing there, trembling. My hand touched hers and I felt her move away. Then I knew! I knew!

I grabbed her, whirling her about. She sucked in her breath. I held her close. She struggled against me for a moment. I kissed her wildly. And then she was clutching me, kissing me in return, but kissing me hard, feverishly. I tightened my arms about her. She began to sob as she drew me closer to her. I had found the key!

Later I went to my room. It was so simple. Why hadn't I seen it all along? She knew what she was, had tried to fight it. Had decided to marry my Uncle because he couldn't bother her, couldn't arouse her, and as long as no man touched her, she could control it. A perfect match: Uncle Cliff, who was too old, and devastating Anita, who was too powerful. Then I had come. Anita had remained distant. She had, until Nephew Dave found the secret. Now, if I moved carefully, things would work out for me nicely. Very nicely indeed.

I came back downstairs. Anita was sewing. The look of fear was gone now when her eyes met mine. The drive, the terrible desire was there, suppressed, but alive.

"You've got to be careful," I said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Uncle Cliff can't suspect. You'll

upset the boat, darling. And I don't want to have to swim."

"You know what you are?" she said, biting against her lip.

"Tell me."

She declined. She looked down at her sewing, but her hand was not steady.

"Just think what Uncle Cliff would say if he knew that his little wife had gone wild with the visiting nephew."

"You wouldn't."

"No, honey," I said. "I'm not stupid. This is my free ride. Besides, if I told Uncle Cliff, his ulcer might get him and he can't stand many of those, you know."

Anita buried her face in her hands.

"Don't break your heart," I said. "This isn't my first day out. If Uncle Cliff goes, you get half of his estate. You know that. Does that make you tearful . . . or do you still think I'm stupid?"

She raised her head. Anita was trapped. She knew it. Physically she was dependent on me, and mentally she was bound, because I could expose her at any time. This caused feelings of desperation.

I went outside and walked about. Desperation is a very bad thing. I once had a college friend who had an affair with a girl. She was below him socially. In fact, she was so far down she was out of sight. One day she came to him and told him she was pregnant. Maybe she was . . . I don't know. But my friend became desperate. He offered the girl money to go away. She didn't take the bait. He begged her not to expose him. She didn't impress easily. So she crowded him into a corner and he killed her. He strangled her in an automobile. A crazy thing to do . . . sure. But he was desperate, and sometimes people who are desperate ruin everything. And I didn't want to crowd my little love bird quite that far. There's one thing about me. I'm smart. Nobody out-thinks me. I take pride in that. Most people are dummies really. All they need is handling, like so many trained seals. Everybody has a weakness, a key.

Aside from being smart, I'm a very lazy kind of person. Uncle Cliff has always taken care of me. I wasn't much of a problem. All I needed was a comfortable living. That was important to me. Very, very important. No nymphomaniac was going to mess up my little red wagon with her insane desire. I had to figure Anita very carefully because it would not do to make her desperate. How much did she know? How far would she go?

I went back inside. "I'm sorry," I said. "I've been shoved around a lot in my life. Nobody ever wanted me. So I figure everybody has an angle. I'm sorry I said that a while ago. I was mad. I've wanted you for a long time. When I had you, I didn't want to give you up. But I have to, don't I?"

It was pathetic. The kid turned inside out. She was weak in that way, but she was good. Basically she wanted to be a good wife. She just couldn't help herself. "It's all right," Anita said. "It won't happen again. We just have to be sensible. You'll have to discipline yourself."

"I know," I said. "I will."

Her face was frustration personified. She was Eve with the taste of the apple hot on her lips and she was telling Adam that it didn't taste good, but she knew all the time that she'd burn up if she didn't get another bite. But on the outside, out where voices speak, we understood each other. We were going to be good little scouts and play nice.

I guess she believed it. I don't see how she could, but maybe so.

When Uncle Cliff came home, she ran to the door and opened it for him. "Did you get your medicine?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Feeling better?"

"Just a little tired," Uncle Cliff said.

We ate and in a few minutes Uncle Cliff retired. Anita sat uncomfortably across the room. Two or three times I looked from my book to see her staring at me. *Hungry, baby?* I thought. *Keep your appetite. I can put it to use later. But don't get worried. Everything is all right. Don't fight it. Just let it lull you into the trap. You aren't very smart, you know. You'll be easy to get rid of when the time comes.*

The next morning I went out to my plane. I cranked up and took off across the wheat pasture. As the ship was airborne, I saw Anita standing in the doorway. I flew to the north, across the Oklahoma border. In the distance, I saw a line of mountains. Below, a huge resort lake, cradled in the mountains, glistened in the sunlight. The mountains, I recognized from the map, were the Wichitas. They weren't very tall, the largest peak about a mile high. But they covered a lot of ground.

I caught myself smiling as I banked the plane over the mountains. It's strange how a plan seems to form suddenly, without effort, and emerges with a minimum of thought, as though the mind functioned separately from the will.

A two-place ship like mine cruising over these mountains might suddenly develop serious trouble. No emergency landing would be possible. And the occupants would be forced to parachute. And one of the chutes doesn't open properly. Tragic accident! I turned the ship about and cruised back to Texas. When I reached the ranch and flew over, Anita ran outside and waved. The wind was blowing the skirt against her legs. Her hair was free and wild in the breeze. I nosed the ship down and swept over her,

pulled up and did a slow roll. I banked, slipped and touched down.

I taxied over to the ranch house. I climbed out and walked over to the porch. Uncle Cliff and Anita were looking at me.

"You can really drive that thing, Dave," Uncle Cliff said.

I laughed. "How about a spin?"

"No," he said. "I'll make it some other time. I might go in the morning if it's pretty, and we'll check the herd from the air. That is, if you don't mind flying me around like that."

"Sure thing," I said. "It will save you a lot of time." I turned to Anita. She was still feeling the thrill of the plane swooping down like a giant bird.

"You ever flown?" I asked her.

"No."

"Come on," I said, "I'll take you up."

She took a quick step toward the plane, then stopped, glancing at Uncle Cliff.

"Go on," Uncle Cliff assured. "Tame him down so he won't scare the daylights out of me tomorrow."

Anita, like a little child, ran to the plane. I fastened the parachute about her and took off, flying level, gaining speed. Then I pulled back on the stick and up we went. I turned to watch her as we reached up for the clouds. She was breathless.

"Oh, Dave," she said, "it's so wonderful."

I flew over the roving hills, banking and slipping until we were far out of sight of the house. I found a nice spot and throttled back.

"What are we doing?" Anita asked.

"Going down for a minute."

I glanced at her. For a moment I saw the old suppressed fear. The ship hit an air pocket, and she grabbed my arm. The fear was gone. Anita was living now. Really living.

When the plane stopped, I climbed out and lifted Anita to the ground. I held her waist and pulled her to me.

"Oh, Dave," she said, unable to fight it.

"It has to be," I said. "We need each other."

"Yes, Dave, yes," she said. She pulled my head down to hers and bit me savagely on the lips. Her arms were around me and I could feel her warm, twisting body.

After a while we smoked cigarettes in the shade of the wing.

"I'm going to fix it for us," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Uncle Cliff is going to have an accident tomorrow."

"Oh, Dave . . . you couldn't . . ."

"Stop it," I shouted. "Do you think I like it this way? How long can we go on like this? Can you forget it? Can you?"

Her face, so childlike, was lifted up to me. She could not speak. I grabbed her and turned her to me, smothering her face with kisses.

Just enough. Then I stopped. "Can you forget it?" I demanded.

She began to cry.

"It will be an accident," I said.

"How, Dave?" she asked. "How can you do it?"

"We'll have an emergency. We'll have to jump. Uncle Cliff's chute won't open."

"Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'll just jam it. I've seen parachutes packed before. I'll jump myself and let the plane crash. I've even got the place picked out. We'll have to jump. If we didn't, we'd be killed in the crash."

"Something could go wrong. I'm afraid for you to try it."

"But you want me to do it."

Anita turned away.

"Look at me, Anita. Look at me and tell me you want me to do it because you can't go on like it is."

"Tell me how it will be, Dave."

"Just the two of us. We'll go anyplace, do anything. You're a beautiful woman, Anita. You're the kind of woman I like. I'd show you off to all the other men in the world. You're wonderful."

Her eyes were intent. She smiled. "Kiss me, Dave," she said, and her hot breath was on the back of my neck.

We flew back to the ranch. The idea was perfect. Parachutes in private planes kept on isolated ranches would not be inspected for long intervals. A chute might become tangled. It happens fairly often, except that usually an inspection reveals the danger before some poor joker steps out in mid-air.

That night, I lay on my bed thinking about it. I had to be certain that it was perfect. The weather was cold. If I flew to the mountains and shoved the carburetor air heat knob forward, the carburetor would start to ice up. I'd keep the motor at three-fourths throttle. Then, when the motor began to sound very rough, I'd jam the throttle full open. That would kill the engine, and iced up, it wouldn't start again. A crash would be inevitable.

I'd let Uncle Cliff jump first. Then, when he was clear, I'd hit the silk myself. There would be campers from the resort who would hear the engine stop, and look up to see it happen. It was a cinch.

I lay there until all the sounds of the house had died. Then I crept out to the plane. I carried a small flashlight. With great care I opened the parachute and stretched it out. Then I traced the lines, and fouled them so that the release would send them skyward, but so tangled that they would not break the fall. They call them "streamers" in the paratroops. I went over my work very carefully. Then I packed the chute again. I put the chute in the copilot seat where Uncle Cliff would sit.

My chute was still in position. I checked it over just for good measure. It was perfect. I'd never

jumped before, but for 20,000 acres of ranch land, I'd jump off the moon.

I stepped back into the house. Once inside, I stood very still and listened. There was no movement. I felt a sense of exhilaration. I went to my room and got in bed.

When it was over, I would handle Anita, childlike Anita, until a reasonable mourning period had been observed. Then I'd marry her. I'd let this go on for a while, paying less and less attention to her. She'd begin to go wild. I'd plant an opportunity for her and trap her with another man. I'd sue for divorce and get most of her part of the ranch, or make a small money settlement out of court. I felt very proud of myself. That's life, I thought. The guys on top are there because they know how to kick harder and fight dirtier than the next joker. I fell asleep.

"How do you feel this morning, Uncle Cliff?" I asked.

"Fine," he said brushing the grey hair back with his hands.

"After breakfast I'll fill up the plane and we'll go check the herd."

"All right," Uncle Cliff said. His face was pulled into a nervous frown.

I laughed. "Don't tell me you're getting afraid of going up."

Uncle Cliff smiled. "Well, maybe another day."

"You can't do that," I said, trying to keep my voice light. "You told me you wanted to go."

"Yes," the old man said, "but I'm not used to that sort of thing. I'm afraid my stomach . . ."

The idea that he wouldn't go was terrifying. I fought the anger rising in my chest. We came into the kitchen. Anita was busy preparing breakfast.

"Did you hear that, Anita?" I asked. "Uncle Cliff is trying to back out on me. He doesn't want to fly this morning."

Anita turned quickly, glancing at me. I signaled her fiercely with my eyes. Anita smiled, and pursed her lips. "Now, Cliff," she said teasing, "are you really afraid?"

Uncle Cliff stared at her for a moment. I really felt sorry for the old guy. Honestly. Anita was all he had in the world to love and he was too old to do that properly. And if she lost faith in him, he was as good as dead. I saw the magic of it work in his mind. I rubbed his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Uncle Cliff," I said. "You'll be flying by yourself before long."

Anita looked at me sharply, as though she didn't think that was a very funny thing to say. When we finished coffee, Uncle Cliff announced that he'd go to the corral for a few minutes and when he got back, we'd take the airplane ride.

He left the house. I turned to Anita.

"That was fast thinking," I said.

"It's not easy to do this," she said.

"Just forget about it," I said smil-

ing. "When I get back, the world will be ours. Remember that."

"It's a long way down," Anita said sadly.

I laughed. In a moment, I saw the smile pull at her lips. We were in tune now. I even looked forward to this woman, for a while at least.

I hurried to the plane. I climbed in first and buckled my chute to my body. I took all the precautions to make sure it was secure. Uncle Cliff came to the ship and climbed in.

"Uncle Cliff," I explained, fastening his chute, "this is the rip cord. If anything happens . . . it won't, but if it does, you jump out of the airplane and hold onto this clasp. Then jerk it. And the chute comes open."

"I don't know if I like this or not," Uncle Cliff said.

Anita appeared, quite timely, and waved from the doorway. Uncle Cliff patted the hand clasp of the rip cord and settled back against the seat with a sigh.

We flew over the herd and Uncle Cliff pointed out the young calves, the steers nearly ready for market, and showed me the new pasture.

When we finished, I turned the ship toward the mountains.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"I thought I'd fly you over the mountains," I said. "It's a beautiful sight. We're in no hurry, are we?"

"No."

"Nervous?"

"Not anymore. I like this."

I smiled. *You won't for long, dear Uncle Cliff. You are enjoying your first and last ride.*

I climbed the ship to eight thousand feet so we'd have plenty of time to get out when the engine died. We reached the mountains. I began to circle. I shoved the carburetor air heat lever in, killing the heat that kept the carburetor from freezing. It wouldn't be long. I heard the engine begin to labor. My hands were clammy and wet.

"It sure is beautiful, Dave," Uncle Cliff said. He nodded at me. "You know, I'm not one for slobbering around, but I want to tell you something. Since you've been at the ranch, I've felt a lot better. You've changed my life. And Anita . . . I can see how much you've brightened her days . . . I'm old and . . ."

I waved my hand at him. I didn't want to hear anymore. I couldn't stand it. This wasn't as easy as I had thought, and I didn't want the old man blabbering sentimentally in my face when that engine was about to freeze up.

It came quickly. When I thought it was going to die, I jammed full throttle. The engine coughed, sputtered, and the prop stuck. Uncle Cliff sensed something had gone wrong. He saw the dead prop and his face became a mass of wrinkles.

"We're in trouble," I said.

"Oh, Dave," he said, "are we going to crash?"

I laughed nervously to escape the

thoughts that were driving through my mind like pistons. "We've got to jump. Remember what I told you?"

"Jump?" He looked down and froze.

I glanced at the altimeter. We had dropped five hundred feet. The mountains were reaching up towards us. "We've got to get out," I said. I reached across him and opened the door. The wind hit us with a sudden chill. "It's jump or die, Uncle Cliff," I said. "Just jump out and count five and pull that clasp. You'll float down. Now do what I say. Get out."

"I can't," he cried. "I can't jump."

I fought panic. There was no possible way to start that frozen engine again. I had to get him out. I pulled his hands free from the door. He looked at me. I slapped his face. "Be calm," I said. "Now jump."

All the trust he ever had in his life was in his eyes then. He turned loose of the door and fell forward as I had told him. I sighed.

The plane was going down fast now. I took a deep breath, grabbed the side of the door, ready to dive out. It was then I saw the white flash as Uncle Cliff's parachute opened and he floated toward earth.

What had gone wrong? I thought frantically of the job I had done last night. Sure. Maybe the jerk of the cord freed the tangled lines. A terrible, sick feeling hit my stomach. I remembered something. It was a single clue . . . so unimportant . . . so ridiculously innocent that I had not seen it.

"It's a long way down," Anita had said. To me. Why to me? Did she go out there and switch the chutes, giving me the jammed chute? If she had . . . but it was incredible. She couldn't have done that.

The terrible choice was coming. I was meeting an instant of refusal. If I did not jump in a moment, I would have to crash with the plane. I knew my chances to escape the crash were so slim as to be unthinkable.

Did Anita switch the chutes? Did Uncle Cliff's chute open in spite of the job I had done on it? I looked at the altimeter. The plane was only two thousand feet above the mountain. I had no choice. I braced myself and dived through the doorway.

I fell. When I was clear of the plane, I jerked the rip cord. For an instant, there was nothing. Then I felt a jerk, the chute was coming open. I looked up as it stretched out above me, not blossoming like a flower, but jammed into a twisted bundle, a streamer.

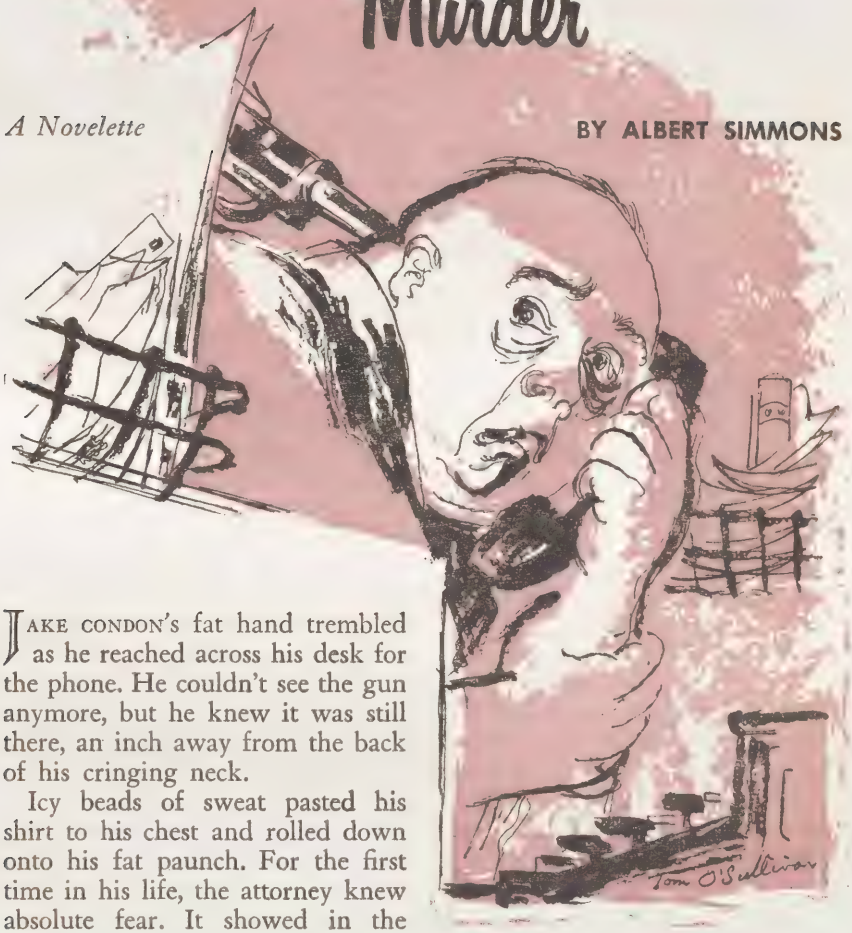
She had done it. I jerked madly at the strings of the chute in a desperate attempt to free the strands.

I knew it was no use. I looked through squinted eyes, as the mountain peak sped up toward me. Anita was right. It took so long, so very long to fall.

Invitation to Murder

A Novelette

BY ALBERT SIMMONS



Jake made the phone call. With that gun pressed against the back of his head he had little choice . . .

JAKE CONDON'S fat hand trembled as he reached across his desk for the phone. He couldn't see the gun anymore, but he knew it was still there, an inch away from the back of his cringing neck.

Icy beads of sweat pasted his shirt to his chest and rolled down onto his fat paunch. For the first time in his life, the attorney knew absolute fear. It showed in the helpless sag of his beefy shoulders, his fingers bloodless and shaking.

Outside the partially opened office window came the occasional

sound of late night traffic but Jake heard only the clicking noise of the dial and his own hoarse, desperate breathing.

The phone made a loud click in his ear as someone at the other end picked up. "H . . . hello?" he mumbled, "is . . . is Eddie there? Eddie Steele?"

"Just a minute."

Jake half turned, and death became a hard, round object that bored into the fat of his neck. He sobbed.

Eddie's voice on the phone was saying, "Hello?"

"Eddie?" he croaked, "Eddie?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"It's Jake . . . Jake Condon."

For a moment there was only silence at the other end. Then, "What the hell do *you* want?"

"I . . . I . . ." The lawyer faltered, but the steady pressure of the gun at his neck reminded him. "Eddie, I . . . I've got to talk to you."

"You can't tell me nothing, Jake," Eddie grated through the phone. "You had your chance at the trial to prove it was a frame and you didn't do a damned thing for me, Jake. Sometimes I think you didn't give it much of a try."

"Eddie . . ."

"It cost me three years, Jake, three lousy years."

"You didn't take that dough, Eddie," the attorney blurted out hoarsely. "It wasn't you who took Joe Barrie's money."

Eddie cursed. "You sonofabitch! You can tell me that now? After three years in the stinking hole you're going to tell me that you believe me?"

"Yes, Eddie, yes."

"You're too late, shyster. I've already done time."

"I'm sorry, kid. I swear I am."

"You're sorry!" His voice soared with anger. "Why do you want to tell me now, Jake? I tried to tell you three years ago that it was a frame . . ." His voice trailed off, then came back, high-pitched and full of poison. "What are you saying, Jake? That you knew all the time? Is that it, Jake?"

"Eddie . . ."

"*Why?*" It came as a horrible, empty sound.

The muzzle of the nickle-plated gun kept up its steady pressure against the back of Jake's neck. "Eddie," he whined, "I had to."

"You bastard!"

The gun was pushing so hard against the lawyer's head that it made his neck arch. "Eddie," he whimpered, "I've got to talk to you. You've got to come over here."

Silence.

"Eddie, I . . . I've got to tell you, I've got to. It wasn't Barrie who framed you."

"No?"

"It was . . . me."

"You!" It came as a hoarse whisper.

"I . . . I had to get it off my

chest, Eddie. I had to tell you."

"I swear to God, somebody ought to kill you," Eddie breathed venemously. "You're not fit to live."

"Eddie, for God's sake!" The muzzle of the gun was bruising his flesh. "Eddie, I've got to see you."

"Yeah, Jake," he whispered, "I'll be there."

"Now. Right away. You've got to come, Eddie . . ." The gun bent Jake's head forward, reminding him. "I . . . I'm at my office," he said.

"I'm driving right down, Jake." The voice was ominous.

"You're driving? Eddie . . ."

The voice behind Jake whispered, "Hang up!"

The attorney obeyed instantly. He sobbed. "For God's sake," he moaned. "What are you making me do?"

"Shut up," the voice at his elbow said.

So, Jake sat there staring into space while the sweat poured down his face and he thought and thought. After a few minutes he was told to pick up the telephone again. He dialed the number and waited. The feel of the gun at his head wouldn't go away.

"Marty?" he grunted when he heard the assistant D.A.'s voice on the phone. "This is Jake Condon."

He sounded sleepy. "What do you want, Condon? It's almost midnight. Can't you call me at the office tomorrow?"

"No." It was a hoarse whisper. "I had to tonight. It's important, Marty."

"What's important?" The assistant D.A. sounded annoyed.

"It's Eddie Steele, Marty." The gun prodded him. "He's going to kill me."

The prosecutor made a noise into the mouthpiece. "What the hell are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

"Marty! I swear. It's the truth. He just told me over the phone . . . He sounded crazy."

"It don't make sense, Jake."

"Marty, I got to have protection."

"What from? Eddie Steele? What the hell for?"

"I don't know, I swear I don't. But he's going to kill me. I know he is." He sounded hysterical. "I've got to have protection, Marty. I'm a taxpayer, I know my rights."

"All right, all right," the assistant D.A. said at last, "only it sounds real screwy, Jake. I'll call downtown and have someone look you up. Where—"

"I'm at my office, Marty." The gun jabbed at him and he said goodbye nervously and hung up. "For God's sake," he moaned without looking around, "I don't understand, I swear I don't understand what you want of—"

The gun went off twice in quick bright orange bursts of flame and the back of Jake's head exploded like an over-ripe melon. He fell for-

ward heavily, bouncing off the highly polished wood of his desk and was dead even before he hit the floor.

2.

Eddie Steele parked his borrowed car in front of the Commerce Building and went into the empty lobby through the night entrance. A young man in his late twenties, Eddie's eyes burned with an old hatred. It had festered inside him for three years. Now, he had a new one—fat Jake Condon.

Yet, wasn't it all too late? Nothing Jake could say or do would give him back his three years. Jake could only clear him. He'd wanted more than that but perhaps now he would have to settle for that alone.

Eddie'd had time since the phone call to think. Driving down from uptown he had nothing *but* time and the more he thought about it the more he was convinced that the fat boy's phone call stank, it stank to the skies. Yet, he couldn't stay away from the lawyer's office. There had been an immediacy in Jake's voice that was hard to deny.

Jake Condon had been Eddie's attorney at the trial. Jake had merely gone through the motions, he knew that now. The fat man had three years to talk, but he hadn't. Instead, he'd waited and chosen tonight to spill his guts.

He remembered how, in court, the district attorney, calling his case cut and dried, had set out to prove that it was Eddie Steele who had taken the two G's from the art dealer who employed him. The D.A. had plenty help in convincing the jury: old man Barrie, Detective Johnny Walters and now, he knew, fat Jake himself.

Being assistant to a man like Joseph Barrie could have its compensations. To Eddie it had been Barrie's young wife, Beth. All the time he'd worked for Barrie, the job had merely been a job, affording him security of a kind. But the day Joseph Barrie had married Beth Nicola and brought her to live in his large penthouse apartment, things had changed for Eddie Steele.

From the first moment he'd seen her, Eddie had known that he wouldn't rest until he had Beth. She was young, she was beautiful and she had a way of walking that told him what he wanted to know about her.

It had been easy, almost too easy.

Beth was twenty-one, her husband fifty-seven.

After the first time, they'd always been so careful, so very careful, that Eddie had never really believed that the old guy would find out. But things like that have a way of revealing themselves, somehow, sometime. Perhaps Beth had always known it would happen; perhaps she didn't care.

By the time he was faced with the realization that the elderly art dealer must have known, he was facing a jail sentence on a charge of larceny. Revenge was something Eddie could understand, but the cold-blooded, carefully prepared frame that had been dropped over his head went far beyond anything he could ever comprehend.

He'd wondered during those days, why old man Barrie never mentioned the things he must certainly have known about his wife's relationship with his good looking employee. Yet never once had Barrie revealed what must have been eating at his guts. At all times, in court and out, he'd very carefully maintained the appearance of a trusting employer outraged at discovering his assistant had robbed him of two thousand dollars. There was nothing more.

Oh, Joseph Barrie had been very clever, Eddie had admitted to himself, very clever. If it was revenge he'd wanted, he'd wanted it only against Eddie Steele. Perhaps, Eddie had concluded, the art dealer had already forgiven Beth, or perhaps his revenge against her would take some other form. Whatever it was, the old man had never mentioned anything about what had been going on between Beth and Eddie. And because he'd never believed that Barrie could make his absurd charge of larceny stick, Eddie had let it go.

Then Detective Johnny Walters had stood up in court and sworn that he'd found the stolen money in Eddie's apartment. That was the day Eddie had known that the frame would stick and that there was nothing he could do about it.

From then on he'd hated Joseph Barrie with a cold, gnawing hatred that wouldn't let him be. When he'd learned, a year later, that the elderly art dealer had died, he had felt cheated. Now, suddenly, everything was turned upside down. It hadn't been Joseph Barrie at all, it was Jake Condon.

He stood there for a moment outside the lawyer's office, the darkened hallway lighted only by the light coming from within. The attorney's name, printed in black letters on the frosted glass of the door, brought back all the old hatred and bitterness that had gone to waste.

He opened the door and went in.

Every light in the place was ablaze and when he saw the back of fat Jake's head he almost got sick. He stood there shaking; jumped nervously at the sound of tires on the street below.

Eddie turned and ran.

Vaguely he seemed to know that he could never tell the police about Jake's phone call. Wasn't the fat man's confession an invitation to murder?

So, frenziedly, Eddie ran. He kept running until he was wet with perspiration, and remembered the car he'd left in front of the Commerce Building. By then, it was

too late.

He got out of the subway at the 23rd Street Station and went into an all-night coffee shop. He knew he mustn't run anymore. He must stop and think.

The counterman with dull grey eyes and hair the color of dirty wash, shoved a steaming cup of coffee at him. "You sick or something, buddy?" he asked.

Eddie looked up. "Huh?"

"I said, you sick or something?" He watched Eddie sip at the coffee. "Got troubles, huh?"

Eddie put a dime down. After a few more sips Eddie got up and walked out.

Outside on the almost deserted street, the red neon in front of the coffee joint was the only sign glowing. The Grammercy section of town was just a few blocks to the east. And Beth's apartment just beyond. Beth had lived in Joseph Barrie's penthouse ever since the old guy had died; it was hers now.

Eddie knew then why he'd come all the way down here. Beth. He'd deliberately stayed away from her since he'd gotten out. In three years he hadn't heard from her once. A guy doesn't have to be hit over the head. Yet, Beth owed him something and he needed her now. There was no one else.

When she opened the door he saw that she was as blonde and as beautiful as ever.

"Eddie," she breathed hoarsely, "Eddie . . ."

"I had to come, Beth," he said quietly.

"It's one o'clock," she whispered. "It's too late." She stood there in the doorway of the penthouse apartment without opening it any further.

"I got to see you, Beth."

Her eyes looked worried. "It's late, Eddie," she said again.

"Over three years, and that's all you've got to say, Beth?" He pushed the door open and went inside.

She stood there, her back against the closed door, watching him. Her long blonde hair fell softly around her throat and shoulders and the petulant look of her mouth was the same as he remembered it. She pulled the negligee tighter around her and the way it clung to her body told him that she had nothing on underneath.

The pulse in his throat throbbed hotly. "Beth, baby." He reached for her.

She didn't protest when he kissed her, but there was nothing there. Not a damned thing. He let go.

Her eyes strayed away. "Well, what did you expect? It's been three years."

He hunched his shoulders. "Yeah, I know."

He peered at her and then followed her into the living room, noticing that she still moved the same cat-like way, her hips swinging, her long legs showing through the thin material of her robe. The way she

walked . . .

She picked a cigarette lighter off a table, her fingers playing with it, clicking it on and off. She knew he'd been watching the outline of her full body. She didn't seem to care particularly one way or the other. She looked at him. "Look, Eddie, let's face it. You just can't expect to walk in here as if it was only yesterday."

"Things change, don't they?" he admitted. "Three years . . ."

Her tongue touched her lip. "I'm sorry, Eddie," she said softly. "No fooling, I am." She said it as if she meant it.

"All that time and you never came once," he said bitterly.

Her eyes flashed. "What good would it have done? And that's the way you wanted it, remember? Stay out of it, Beth, you said—no matter what happens, stay out of it, you said." She put the lighter back on the table and stood there pouting. "Well, I did."

He went over and threw himself down on the big red couch. "I've been out two weeks, Beth. I figured for old time's sake you'd want to see me."

She didn't answer.

"The phone didn't ring once, Beth."

"That's hardly fair."

He shrugged. "Forget it. It doesn't matter anymore, nothing matters anymore."

Her eyes got all wide. "What do you mean, Eddie?"

"I've been a sucker, that's what I mean. All the time I thought it was your husband who'd framed me. For three years I thought that was how the poor schnook paid me back for . . . well, for us." He laughed grimly and she couldn't take her eyes off him. "Big joke, Beth baby. It wasn't him at all—it was Jake."

Her lids narrowed. "I don't understand."

"Me neither, baby." He sighed wearily. "I found out tonight that it was fat Jake who framed me three years ago."

"Jake!"

"Yeah, fat, helpful, willing Jake. Whatever his reasons, I don't know, but it was Jake who gave me the business."

Her face had gone white. She took a cigarette from a box on the table and lighting it took it from her lips and put it between his. "My God, Eddie, but you didn't have to kill him."

"What?"

She bit her lips, her eyes darting away. "I . . . I know about it, Eddie," she said quietly. "It was on the radio. They found your car in front of the building and they . . ." She stopped talking as if she just couldn't go on. She sat down next to him, her hand on his arm. "Oh, Eddie, Eddie, why did you do it?"

He threw the cigarette into the fireplace and watched the orange-colored sparks fly. "I didn't. I swear I didn't."

"You can trust me, you know you can tell me."

"I've already told you," he rasped angrily. He got up. "I didn't kill him. He was dead when I got there."

Two big tears squeezed from beneath her fanning lashes.

He stared at her, searching her face. "He called me, Beth. He told me that he was the guy who'd framed me. He insisted I see him tonight. When I got there he was . . ." He gestured futilely with his hands. "It stinks, doesn't it? Nobody's going to believe that. But it's the truth, I swear it." He pounded his fist into the palm of his hand. "After what he told me over the phone I guess maybe I *could* have killed him, only, I didn't." His gaze caught hers. "You believe that, Beth?"

She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Eddie . . . Eddie, you fool."

He peered at her closely. There was a terrible uneasiness about her now. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I don't know, Eddie, I just don't know."

He yanked her to him, his fingers digging into the warm flesh of her arms. "You don't believe me, do you? I can see you don't. Then . . . then you didn't believe me three years ago either, did you? You thought, too, that I'd taken your husband's dough." When she didn't reply, he grated, "Answer me. Answer me."

"What else was there to believe?"

"That stinks, it stinks like hell." He shoved her away from him. "And all the time I kept my mouth shut about you and me because I thought . . . I've got to have dough." All at once he didn't mind asking her, he found it easier than he'd expected. "You're going to give it to me, Beth," he told her. "A guy can hide when he's got dough. Mexico, South America, there must be a million places."

"No," she cried, "no!" She went to him, putting her hands on his arms, sliding them around his neck. "You can't do that, Eddie; you mustn't . . ."

She strained close to him and he could feel the heat of her soft body; see the worried look in her eyes; her lips, her glistening teeth. He pulled her to him and kissed her roughly, his mouth crushing hers. This time he found the response he'd missed before and for a fleeting moment it was almost as if they'd spanned the years. Then she pulled away.

"Eddie," she whispered. Her eyes looked puzzzled, and they looked frightened. "Eddie, you can't run, you mustn't. They'll catch you and when they do . . ."

"What else is there?"

"Go to the police, Eddie."

"Are you crazy?"

"You've got to give yourself up, Eddie, don't you see that?"

"I got a record now. Three years.

They'll never believe a word. They'll—"

"Ssshh," she touched his lips with the tips of her fingers. "Ssshh." She kissed him then the way she used to, and led him towards the library.

"You come with me, Beth. Let's get out of here now. Fast."

She turned, looking back over her shoulder. She smiled wistfully. "First, you need a drink, Eddie. We both do." There was a catch in her voice. She smiled. "Scotch, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"See, I haven't forgotten."

He sighed and threw himself down on the couch. He'd never felt so tired before in his life. He let his gaze fan around the apartment that should have been so familiar to him. For two and a half years he'd worked here, every day, with old Joseph Barrie. Yet, it was as though he'd never seen it at all. It was so different. Beth had redecorated it completely in the three years he'd been away. Everything was new and strange.

He could hear her inside moving around. And then quite suddenly he couldn't. He got up and opened the library door. Beth was standing there at the desk and when she turned he saw the telephone in her hand.

He cursed and her face went white. Then she screamed.

Eddie turned and ran then, and all the time he was thinking, Beth doesn't believe me, she doesn't believe me. To her he was a murderer, even if it was Eddie, to her he was a murderer and she was afraid of him. She was afraid . . .

3.

For twenty minutes he'd stood there in the darkened doorway on Centre Street. For twenty minutes he'd stood there within sight of the lighted windows and broad steps of police headquarters. Only a short while ago Beth had meant to turn him in and he'd fled in panic. Now he was about to do it himself.

She had pleaded with him to give himself up and he had refused. Now, he knew she was right. Sooner or later they'd get him and perhaps it would be too late for *anyone* to believe him. He had an ominous sense of having waited too long.

He flipped his cigarette to the sidewalk and stepped off the curb. Someone came out of the police building halfway down the block and impulsively he drew back, hiding again in the shadows in front of the darkened store.

In the light coming from the street lamp, Eddie recognized her, even after three years. Jake Condon's secretary. He tried to recall her name and couldn't. Yet, he remembered her very clearly. She was

an attractive brunette with brown, inquiring eyes, a cold detached air and an efficient manner.

He remembered that she'd been in court every day during the trial, yet she'd never spoken to him once. From the beginning, he'd gotten the impression that he'd been guilty in her eyes. Perhaps that had accounted for her aloofness, her studied coldness towards him. Yet, now he could wonder. Seeing her again, he tried to think back to those days in court, attempting in a vague way to connect her up with the confession that fat Jake had made to him before he had died.

Had the girl known about the frame her boss had hung on him three years ago? If she had, then wasn't it feasible that perhaps . . .

She stood there on the sidewalk in front of headquarters, looking up and down as if she was waiting for someone. Then, as the doors opened again, she went forward eagerly to meet the big man hurrying down the flight of steps towards her.

When Eddie recognized him he sucked in his breath. It was Detective Johnny Walters!

They stood there together, talking in quiet, earnest tones—fat Jake's secretary and the big cop whose sworn testimony three years ago had sent Eddie away.

There *had* to be a connection, he told himself, there just had to be!

Whatever strange impulse it was that made him choose the course he did from then on, he would always remember it. For the rest of his life Eddie would remember . . .

He flattened himself in the dark doorway, his eyes glued upon the two people across the street. When they walked to the corner and got in a cab, he darted off the curb and sprinted down the street towards the disappearing car. He had a distinct awareness that what he was doing was crazy, yet he couldn't help himself. He was obsessed with the idea that one of them, perhaps even both, knew something about the fat man's frame, perhaps even his death.

He got into the next cab in line, barking for the driver to follow the other car which by now was almost out of sight. When the hackie hesitated, Eddie boldly pulled a wallet out of his pocket, waving it beneath the man's nose. "Police business," he said. In the darkness the cab driver caught only the urgency of his voice and was apparently convinced.

They followed the cab to the upper West Side and when it stopped in front of a small apartment house on Haven Avenue, he instructed his driver to pull past the house and stop around the corner. After he'd paid his driver off he walked back in time to see the other taxi leave. The big detective was the only fare it had.

He waited a while and then crossed the street to where the

lights had gone on in a third floor apartment. He'd already tried the downstairs door. It was locked. He stood there watching the windows where the lights had flashed on. He couldn't be sure it was the girl's apartment, but while he stood there, the lights in the adjoining room winked on and he saw the girl come to the window and pull down the shade.

He went over then and standing beneath the fire escape, leaped high into the air, hooking the crossbar with his fingers. It was better than using the noisy ladder. He pulled himself up and crouched against the brick wall, breathing hard. He was sweating. After a few moments he moved slowly up to the next landing.

The window of the girl's apartment was open, the shade drawn. He listened. There was no sound from within. Almost with one motion he shoved his legs across the low sill and went into the room.

It was the bedroom. She was sitting at the dressing table brushing her hair. She turned, her eyes wild with fright, her mouth half-open to scream—but no sound came out. In the next instant the paralyzing shock would give way to hysteria and she'd start yelling the place in.

He rushed forward, clapping his hands roughly across her mouth. The sound of her sudden terror rose up and died against his palm. The brush dropped to the floor and her madly flailing arms attacked the air as she struggled violently to get away.

He grabbed her arm and forced it up and behind her back. The stabbing pain made her go pale, and moaning into the gag of his palm, she stopped fighting.

He spun her around so that she was facing the mirror and could see him in the glass. Her eyes were wild with fear. "Are you alone?" he whispered. Her eyes told him that she was.

"Look," he said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

She sobbed into his hand.

He stood behind her, looking down at her. She was no longer in her shoes. She had been wearing a suit. The skirt was still on, but the jacket and blouse were off. The bra revealed every curve of her upper body. In the mirror, her terrified eyes saw the direction his gaze took and, sobbing hysterically, she again commenced to flail her free arm, making a frenzied effort to free herself.

"You crazy fool," he grunted, "do you want me to bust your arm?"

He had only to increase the pressure slightly and her muffled cry of pain moistened his hand. Her struggles subsided.

She was moaning pathetically then, and he eased up the cruel backward bend of her arm. "Look," he told her, "don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you. If you'll promise not to yell I'll let you loose. Only don't yell."

She groaned and nodded her head. He let go.

Her eyes were crazy with fear. "Don't, please, please, don't . . ."

He bent forward, peering at her. What the hell did she think he was going to do? He bit his lip. "Look, kid," he said, "you've got it all wrong. I don't need a woman that bad."

She kept staring at him, sobbing, her body shaking all over. He grabbed the blouse off the chair and tossed it to her. "Cut it out," he said brusquely, "I just want to talk to you, and nothing else, do you understand?" He bent forward. "I'm Eddie Steele."

"Steele," she whimpered, getting into the blouse. "Eddie . . . Steele . . ." He saw recognition in her eyes then.

"You remember me?"

She nodded. "I . . . I don't understand. What do you want of me?" she said slowly. "Why . . . why did you break in here like this?"

He shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't remember your name. I'd have called you if I had, I guess. I saw you in front of headquarters with Walters and I followed you. I followed you here because it's important. Maybe you can tell me something, kid."

She buttoned the top button of the blouse. She still was frightened.

"Look," he said, "you were Jake's secretary. I've got to know—"

He saw her blink, her hand darting to her mouth. "You said—*were.*"

"Did I?"

"Yes, you said . . ." Her big eyes were staring at him accusingly. "Then you know he's dead . . ."

"Huh?" He peered at her, trying to penetrate the strange expression on her face. "Yeah," he said, "I know Jake's dead."

Her gaze moved almost imperceptibly, beyond him, to the window. She wasn't looking at him now, Eddie sensed.

He felt like a dog on a tight leash as the cold voice behind him said, "Don't move, feller."

Detective Johnny Walters sat astride the window sill, his thirty-eight calibre in his hand.

"Johnny!" the girl cried. She jumped up and darted to the big man at the window, burying her face against his chest. She began sobbing wildly.

He held her with one arm, talking to her. The hand that held the pistol didn't waver, his eyes never left Eddie's face for an instant.

"If this dirty bastard has laid a hand on you," he told the girl, "I swear I'll kill him as he stands there."

"No, no," she said quickly.

"You sure, kid?"

Eddie said, "What the hell do you think I am?"

"Shut up," Johnny roared.

"I . . . I don't think he meant to harm me," the brunette said weakly. He . . . he said he wanted to know some things."

"What things?"

"I don't know, I don't know."

He let go of her then, came in and slammed Eddie face first against the wall while he went over him for a weapon. Satisfied, he told him to turn around.

"You're a chump, feller," he said. "Did you really think no one would spot you climbing up here? A neighbor called. I have a personal interest in this neighborhood." Eddie could see that, all right.

The girl said, "It's Eddie Steele, Johnny. He killed Mr. Condon."

"No, no," Eddie yelled. "She's got it all wrong. I didn't kill him. I swear I . . ."

"Shut up!" the big cop thundered. He turned to the girl. "Go on, kid, you were saying . . ."

"Johnny, he *knew* Mr. Condon was dead, he said so himself. How did he know, Johnny, unless . . ."

"You've got it all wrong," Eddie blurted out.

"Shut your mouth," the cop growled. He still held onto the .38. His eyes were fixed on Eddie's face, boring into him, all the time boring into him. "You could of done it. I didn't figure it, but you could of."

"I didn't, I swear I didn't," Eddie replied nervously.

The big cop went on, almost as if he was enjoying himself. "If you hated fat Jake enough to croak him, I wonder what you'd do to me if you'd get the chance, huh?" He grinned coldly.

Eddie gave up then. Eddie had nothing to say, nothing. He seemed to know that he wasn't going to get a chance from then on. Everything was working out all wrong; everything he'd done was all wrong. He'd been a fool. Worse, he'd been taken for one.

"Come on, buster," the big detective said. "We're going downtown." His eyes narrowed. "And do me a favor, Steele? Make a break for it, huh?"

Eddie looked up, startled. "What does that mean?"

The cop didn't answer.

There was no doubt that Johnny Walters wanted him to make a break for it. It was written all over the guy's face. Johnny wanted it because it would give him the chance to pump lead, and pump it with complete immunity.

Why? What had he ever done to the big cop? Wasn't it the other way around? Wasn't it Johnny who'd nailed *him?*

Suddenly, Eddie thought he knew. "Why did you lie about the dough, Walters?"

Walter's face got all red. "What!" he roared.

"You lied about finding that dough in my place three years ago, mister. Why?"

"You must be nuts."

"No, Walters, not nuts." He shook his head angrily. "Were you working with Jake? Was that it? The two of you together?"

"You sonofabitch!" He swung

his gun, hard, and the barrel caught Eddie in the mouth. The blood spurted from between his teeth.

The girl gasped loudly and sat down on the bed.

Eddie put his hand to his mouth. It came away red. He thought he was on the right track then. "Jake phoned me tonight, Walters. You know why? He wanted to get it off his chest. Funny, huh? After three years he had to spill his guts to me that he was the guy who'd framed me. Big joke, eh?"

There was a peculiar expression on the cop's face. "What in hell are you talking about?"

The girl was staring at him from across the room, her mouth wide open, her eyes all whites. He had to gamble that Walters wouldn't shoot him down with her as witness.

"I'll say it again, Walters. Jake called me tonight and admitted that he was the guy who'd framed me three years ago."

The cop licked his lips. "So you killed him."

"He was dead when I got there."

"You were there *tonight?*"

"Yes."

"You admit it?"

"Yes. But I didn't kill him."

The big cop was grinning. "I think you're a damned fool, Steele, a real damned fool."

"Now, wait a minute," Eddie rasped. "I told you I didn't do it. He was dead when I got there."

The big cop scowled, "I ain't swallowing that, Steele."

"I don't care what you think, Walters. But you know what I'm thinking? What if you knew Jake was going to spill his guts, and you didn't want him to."

"You sonofabitch!" the big man shouted. He swung again and the gun barrel caught Eddie flush in the face. He kept on swinging.

The girl was up on her feet, pulling at the policeman's arm and pleading hoarsely with him to stop. Walters shook her off and kept pounding until the smaller man went down on his back and stayed there.

He felt sick to his stomach. He stared up through the red haze at the hard-faced detective standing over him. He could hear the girl sobbing quietly.

"Don't ever say that again, louse," Walters grated. "If you do . . ."

Eddie rolled over and sat up. His face felt sore and the sickness in his belly wouldn't go away.

"You didn't have to do that, Johnny," the girl mumbled; "you didn't have to."

He looked angry. "Look, didn't you hear what the bastard said? Johnny Walters ain't taking that from any two-bit con."

"But you didn't have to . . ."

"Keep out of it. I know what I'm doing."

She walked away uncertainly and stood watching Eddie as he got slowly to his feet. There was something about the way she looked at

him that made him say, "Don't go worrying about me, kid."

The softness quickly went out of her eyes. "I'm not," she said coldly. She turned away.

"Okay, tough guy," the detective snapped, "let's go."

They went into the living room and Walters called downtown. When he hung up he couldn't take his eyes off his prisoner. "So, you *found* him dead, huh?"

"Yes," Eddie said.

"You're a damned liar, Steele. You killed him. You know how I know? The D.A. was just downtown. Know what? Jake phoned him before you got there. The D.A. said that fat Jake wanted protection. Know why, Steele? Jake told the D.A. he wanted protection because you'd threatened to kill him."

"My God! That's crazy," Eddie cried.

"You think so? What are you going to do, fight the D.A.?" He grinned. "I guess that's it, buster," he said. "They were just putting the drag out for you; teletype and radio. I told 'em to forget it, I'm bringing you in."

Eddie was licked then. His shoulders slumped and the ice in the pit of his stomach splintered into jagged pieces. He couldn't run now, not with that big cop in front of him and the D.A.'s words ringing in his ears.

Still, something kept bothering him, crawling around deep in his mind, nagging at him, pestering him, reminding him there was something he should remember—and he couldn't.

"Let's go, Steele," Walters was saying, "and don't get any ideas. So help me, I'd just as soon pump it into you as not."

Eddie knew, then, that he must run; that running was his only chance to stay alive. He walked submissively towards the door. The girl was standing there staring at him as he walked over. Her eyes were big and round and there was a tight line around her lips that hadn't been there before. Eddie threw himself at her with all his strength, spinning her into the big detective. He heard Walters grunt as they collided and went off balance.

Eddie dove for the stairs, down them. Walters fired twice, but Eddie was gone, the bullets plunking into the wood.

Out on the street, another bullet cracked over his head and richocheted off a brick wall with a high-pitched whining sound as Eddie tore around the corner, headed for the elevated station a block away. The train was just rumbling in. He raced up the long flight of stairs, his legs getting heavier and heavier. He had to be at the top before the big man came around the corner.

He was more than half way up when he heard the train thunder overhead, the air brakes hissing as it rolled to a grating stop. He was

stumbling now, his lungs heavy and full of fire. Below him, Johnny Walters came around the corner. Eddie's fumbling feet hit the top as the big cop sprinted for a clear shot at him.

The platform was just ahead. Eddie plunged over the turnstile and through the wide-open car door. He had a plan now, but it required split second timing. The slightest mistake and it would be all over.

The detective was charging up the stairs now. Eddie paused just long enough to deliberately allow the cop to see him inside the train. Then he ran through the car and just as the door started to close ducked back out onto the dark platform. He fell face down into the darkest corner of the wooden platform, flattening himself behind a large trash receptacle. He didn't move.

The train, with Walters in it, moved on toward the next station.

The sweat poured down Eddie's face, stinging his eyes and soaking his clothes as he got up, raced down the stairs into the street below. It had to be fast. He didn't have much time.

A cab cruised by. He hailed it, got in, gave her address and then he saw her—standing there seeking a taxi. My first break of the night, Eddie thought. "Pick up my girl," he told the cabby. He wouldn't have to break into her place now to get her. He reached forward and shut the glass between the front and rear of the hack.

The cab stopped. She got in. Eddie's hand in his jacket pocket looked as lethal as a gun. Her mouth formed into an 'o' of surprise, her eyes fled from his face to the right-hand coat pocket, as he aimed it at her.

"I've got the gun this time," he whispered. "Your boy-friend's gun. One yell and you're dead. Try me!" He spoke out loud to the driver, giving the man Beth's address. He turned back to her. "Three years ago your boss laid it on me real good. I still don't know why, but so help me, I'm going to find out, starting with you."

"You must be insane," she murmured. "You can't get away. They've got you on teletype and radio. Everything."

That was when Eddie remembered what had been gnawing at him since Johnny Walters had spoken about putting him on teletype and radio and what the D.A. had said.

The girl was right; he couldn't get away, he couldn't. But now he knew there was another way, a better way than running.

4.

His finger kept up the steady pressure against the door buzzer until there was the click of the light

switch inside and at last the door opened.

Beth stuck her head out, rubbing her eyes. "Who . . . what . . . What is it?" she mumbled sleepily. She blinked when she saw him. He grabbed the brunette's arm and shoving open the door went inside, closing it behind them.

Beth looked from him to the girl. "What the hell's going on . . ."

"I'll tell you, baby," he said quietly. He let go of the brunette's arm. "Got a drink, Beth?" he asked.

She stared at him, her eyes asking questions. She wrapped her robe around her, her glance flicking at the brunette. "What the devil is going on?"

"A drink, Beth," he said again, "I need it real bad."

She looked angry but she walked away towards the library.

Eddie threw himself down into a chair, conscious of how beat he really was.

Jake's secretary hadn't moved. She just stood there staring at him, her eyes scared and bewildered.

"Go on, sit down, kid," he said. "Where were you going when I pulled up?"

"Where it was safe. Away from you."

Beth came back with a drink. He swallowed it in one quick gulp. "I needed that, baby. Thanks." He glanced at the brunette. "The same as I needed a witness."

Beth said, "Huh?" She eyed Jake's secretary.

Eddie rolled the empty glass in his fingers. "She's going to be my witness, baby, only she doesn't know it."

Beth narrowed her eyes. "I wish I knew what the hell you're talking about, Eddie. What are you doing coming here like this and—"

"I told you, Beth." His voice was very soft. "I needed a witness. The cops are swarming, looking for the guy who killed Jake Condon. They got a crazy idea I did it."

Beth went over and sat down heavily on the couch. Her voice came, sharp and accusing. "You shouldn't have done it, Eddie."

"I didn't, baby. That's just the point."

She glared at him. "What are you driving at?"

He leaned back in the chair. The shot of scotch had made his stomach feel nice and warm. "I told you before, baby, I didn't kill fat Jake. It was a frame, just like three years ago was a frame."

Beth was twisting her fingers together; they were the color of bone. "What do you mean, Eddie?" she whispered hoarsely.

He glanced towards Jake's secretary, who still stood there against the wall, her eyes boring into his. He could see the rapid rise and fall of her full breasts beneath her coat.

He turned back to Beth. "When I was here before," he said, "you told me the police were looking for me. Didn't you?"

"Yes—"

"Tell me something, Beth. How did you know the cops were looking for me?"

"Why . . . I . . . It was on the radio."

"The radio?"

"Don't you remember? They found your car in front of Jake's place and they knew that you were the one who'd . . ." She trailed off. He was shaking his head from side to side.

"It's no good, Beth. They couldn't have traced the car to me. It isn't my car."

"Wh—what!" The blood drained from her face, her mouth was working strangely. "What do you mean?" She leaned forward, every line of her tense.

"It isn't my car," he repeated slowly. "I borrowed it from a friend of mine yesterday. He's on the train tonight on his way to Chicago, baby. The police couldn't have talked with him yet. So how-come they'd know I was the guy he'd loaned his car to?"

She was standing now, her lips making unintelligible sounds behind the white mask of her face.

"See what I mean," he said quietly. "You knew too fast, Beth. You knew Jake was dead almost before anyone else and you thought it was *my* car. You could only have thought that if you'd been with Jake when I told him I was driving down to his office. You had no way of knowing that I'd borrowed the car—that it wasn't mine."

She rocked back and forth on her feet, a stricken expression making her features suddenly ugly and dangerous. Her hand came away from her pocket, there was a small nickel-plated gun in it.

Jake's secretary screamed from across the room.

"Don't be crazy, Beth," he said evenly.

"I'm sorry, Eddie, I swear I am. I had to do it, I had to kill him, the dirty, fat slob."

Eddie wanted to turn and look at Jake's secretary. She was his witness, his only witness; his reason for bringing her here. But he mustn't take his eyes off Beth and that gun.

"The fat pig," the blonde was mumbling dully, "he wanted too much, he wasn't satisfied, he kept wanting more and more. It's my money, mine! He had no right to keep—"

"Oh, my God," the brunette moaned.

Eddie stood up slowly.

Beth waved the gun. "Don't, Eddie, don't!"

"You and Jake," he rasped huskily. "It was you two right from the beginning."

"I'm sorry about that, I really am. I liked you, Eddie, I liked you a lot." Her mouth began to twitch. "But you were Joseph's assistant, and somehow I was afraid you might not go along. With Joseph out of the way Jake and I . . ."

"So you used me as the patsy." He thought about those three years; about how Jake and Beth had framed him and he was thinking how Jake had looked the last time he'd seen him.

"Who put the dough in my apartment?"

"Jake," she said. "Jake was a smart one, real smart, only . . ." She commenced to laugh softly. "Only he wasn't smart enough, huh, Eddie?"

He wondered then how Joseph Barrie had really died and what part she and Jake had in it. He thought he knew but it didn't matter now, nothing mattered except Beth had that gun in her hand.

Jake's secretary began to cry and she couldn't stop.

"Shut up," Beth screamed, "Shut up!" The sobbing seemed to unnerve her. She turned wildly, shrieking at the girl and then she pulled the trigger.

As the gun went off, Eddie dove forward swinging at her with his fist. It caught her flush on the jaw. A look of strange surprise crossed Beth's countenance and then as her eyes rolled upwards, she dropped on her face and didn't move.

Eddie felt sick. He was shaking all over. He bent down and picked up the gun, putting it in his pocket. He turned. Jake's secretary had stopped crying. She was standing against the wall, a peculiar expression on her face. Her skin looked very grey and he thought she was going to faint.

He went over and took her arm. "Are you okay?"

She winced, moaning softly. "I . . . I think I'm shot." She was pointing to her right shoulder. He saw the blood begin soaking through. He cursed out loud and picking her up carried her over and put her on the couch.

"I'm all right," she kept saying, "I'm all right."

"Let me see?"

She didn't protest when he pulled away her clothing. The bullet had lodged in the soft part of her shoulder. "You're lucky, kid," he said. "I think it's just a flesh wound."

He found some clean towels in the bathroom and padded them against the wound, pulling her coat back over the shoulder when he was finished.

"I'm sorry, kid, it had to be like this. But, you were my only chance. I needed a witness real bad and I guess it was the only way I could have gotten you over here. If I'd tried to explain to you . . . Besides, there wasn't that much time, huh?"

"I was scared," she whispered.

"Me, too."

She smiled wanly. "I . . . I'm glad it worked out like this."

"Yeah, me, too."

He went over and phoned police headquarters, telling them to send Johnny Walters right away. He asked for an ambulance, too. Then he went over and sat down next to her on the sofa.

"Johnny will probably get a promotion out of this," he said.

She smiled. "Will he?"

She began to shiver then and he went inside and got a bunch of blankets, wrapping them around her. She started to cry softly and he didn't attempt to stop her. He guessed she'd earned it. He just sat there and waited.

After three years, Eddie was used to waiting. But, this kind of waiting was different. This was better, a hell of a lot better . . .

Rapid Recovery

In Dallas, Texas, a burglar broke into a print shop and took $290 from the printer's coat pocket and some work clothes from a locker room. The printer, while checking the shop with police, found a pair of unfamiliar soiled trousers in a corner of the locker room. He decided the thief must have changed his trousers before leaving. The printer's $290 was found in one of the pockets.

Horse Thief

Irwin Chapman, 27, of Omaha, Nebraska, told police that a stranger with a gun pushed his way into his apartment when he answered his doorbell. The man looked around, then pointed his finger at a homemade rocking horse. "I want that," the robber said. Then, according to Chapman, the man placed the rocking horse under his arm and walked out.

It Pays to Advertise

After a series of holdups in Fairbanks, Alaska, the Big Bend Liquor Store inserted this advertisement in the Daily News-Miner: "Everybody loves us. Nobody robs us because we are straight shooters." On the following day two bandits entered the store, held up the clerk, Mary Kossoff, and escaped with $5,000.

Slick Trick

Deputy Sheriff George McMillan, of Miami, Florida, made his task of catching a bookmaker easy. After he concealed himself outside the suspect's back door, he had another officer telephone the bookmaker and warn him that the "cops are coming." McMillan said the bookie ran out the back door in less than 30 seconds. "He ran right into my arms," the officer added, "and he had all the evidence with him."

OF THE two people waiting patiently for Paul Melcor to be released from prison, Melcor himself was undoubtedly one. But Hugh Lambert, husband of the woman Melcor had killed, was just as certainly the other. And when Melcor was paroled after two years, Hugh Lambert was glad about it, too. Though for a different reason.

"I want to find out only one thing," he instructed the private detective he'd hired. "I want to know where Melcor will be living. Bring me his address, that's all."

The address, as he'd rather expected, sounded like a temporary one. The Ace Hotel, a third-class establishment in a decaying district.

"You'll be killed by an automobile, Melcor. And I'll be driving it."

BY

C. B. GILFORD

Dead People are Never Angry

"That's what I wanted," he told the detective. "But I'll probably have to call you again. Melcor may move around a bit, and I'll want to keep track of him."

He went to the Ace Hotel that same night, avoided the birdcage elevator, and took the stairs instead. The corridors were thin-carpeted, but he didn't care. He wasn't making a stealthy approach. He went straight to 306 and knocked.

When there was no answer at first, he thought that maybe Melcor was out, maybe even already checked out. But he was persistent anyway, and a cautious voice finally asked, "Who is it?"

"Ann Lambert's husband," he said without emotion.

After a while, and even more hesitantly, Melcor asked, "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you." Then he added, truthfully, "I don't have a gun."

He grew a little impatient when Melcor failed to open the door, or even to reply. "Look," he said, "you can't avoid me because you can't leave town on account of your parole. And I won't go away. So you might as well talk now as later."

A minute afterwards the lock clicked reluctantly and the door opened a crack. He did the rest for himself, pushed his way inside and closed the door behind him. As he did this, his host retreated as far as he could in the tiny room, to the bed, into which he backed. His own momentum sat him down.

Lambert considered him. Melcor, narrow-shouldered and thin in his undershirt, his face dirty-white like wet flour, wasn't pretty. There would be little loss to the world when he was dead.

"Well, what have you got to say to me?" Melcor asked suddenly.

Lambert sat down uninvited. His manner was calm, steady, because he had made up his mind a long time ago.

"Say what you have to say and then get out," Melcor added quickly, a bit more excited. "You've got no right to hound me. I've paid my debt to society."

Lambert laughed, briefly, bitterly. "Two years," he said. "You call that paying? Two years and you get out of prison. But my wife doesn't get up and walk out of the grave."

"I can't help that, Lambert."

"No, it's too late for that."

"It was an accident."

"The jury said it was criminal negligence."

"All right . . ."

"You ran a red light. Remember, Melcor?"

"For God's sake, Lambert, you don't forget a thing like that."

"Good. Then you know how I feel. You can understand why I haven't forgotten."

There was a silence while Melcor digested this—the words, the way they were said, and the look on

Lambert's face.

"Lambert, you don't mean what you said two years ago . . ."

Lambert helped him. "What I said in the courtroom after I heard the judge pass that lousy, stinking little sentence? I meant it then, and I mean it just as much now. Even more so maybe. I've waited for you, Melcor."

The pale little man in the undershirt was sweating, though the room wasn't overheated. The dim light gleamed on beads of sweat that dotted his balding head. But his lips were dry and he licked them.

"You're crazy," he said finally.

"Maybe so, Melcor. A man has a beautiful wife he's been married to for only a year. And in a couple of months he's going to be a father. He's awful anxious and he's awful glad about going to become a father. Then one bright sunny morning there's his wife crossing the street to meet him. From the corner he watches her coming toward him. He's happy and he's proud. Then all of a sudden his whole life is changed for him. The whole roof of the world caves in on him. Because there's an idiot behind the wheel of the automobile coming down the street. The traffic lights are changing. Sure, the wife maybe isn't as careful as she ought to be. She's too excited. She's going to meet her husband to shop for nursery furniture. She's in a hurry. She starts across the first second she has the green light. But the idiot is in a hurry, too. His light turns to yellow, and then to red. That doesn't stop him though. There's an awful crunch and a scream. And the husband standing there watching sees the end of the world—his world. Yes, Melcor, I guess maybe that could drive a man crazy."

Melcor stared. "Yes, you are crazy," he agreed. His thin hands fidgeted helplessly. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill you."

"But you said . . . you promised . . . you didn't have a gun."

Hope flickered in the ex-convict's eyes. But he wasn't quite sure. He phrased his next question cautiously. "How are you—going to kill me?"

The answer was quick. "I was there that day, Melcor. I saw just how it happened. Every little ugly detail. The bumper hit her first, just at the knees, seemed to break her body right there. Then the hood and the grille and one of the headlights smashed at the soft parts of her, lifted her up and threw her away like a sack of something worthless. She landed on concrete, and bounced and rolled. Under the squeal of your brakes I could hear each blow, metal and cement striking flesh. I saw the blood, on her and the street. . . I'll tell you something, Melcor, it wasn't a pleasant or easy death. She died afraid and in pain. It wasn't quick or simple

like being shot."

Melcor's small little eyes rolled, as the horror came upon him. "What do you mean . . .? he asked without hope.

"You'll be killed by an automobile, Melcor."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'll be driving it."

It was the next morning, just after daylight, that Lambert was awakened by a loud, insistent knocking on his door. When he got out of bed and opened the door, he guessed the identity of the visitor in the plain gray suit.

"You a cop?" he asked indifferently.

"Sergeant Daniels," the man admitted. "Can I come in?"

"Sure."

"I'll get right down to it," the Sergeant said as Lambert began dressing. Paul Melcor phoned us just after you left the Ace Hotel last night. He claims you threatened to kill him."

"He can't prove it though, can he?" Lambert pointed out.

The Sergeant stiffened noticeably. "We're not trying to be nasty, Lambert. Just came to give you a friendly little warning."

Lambert didn't stop dressing, and his voice stayed even and controlled. "I don't need any favors from cops or judges or parole boards or any law-enforcers in this lovely country."

Daniels didn't get tough. He even looked sympathetic. "Maybe you've got a legitimate beef, Lambert," he admitted. "I don't know. It isn't my job to decide those things. You don't think Melcor got what he deserved. You want an eye for an eye. Well, you can't have it. If you try to take it, we'll nail you, Lambert. You'll become a criminal yourself. Do you think your wife would appreciate that?"

"She's dead, Sergeant. So I haven't asked her."

Lambert went into the bathroom and started to shave. Daniels followed him as far as the doorway. There was no conversation for several minutes, just the running water and the scraping noise of the razor hacking at the beard. In the mirror the eyes of the two men met occasionally.

"You're going to get him with an automobile, I hear," the Sergeant began after a while.

"Am I?"

"You warned Melcor. That's going to make him a pretty careful pedestrian. How are you going to manage it?"

"It'll take time. But the longer he has to think about it the better."

"You're a sadist, Lambert."

"Is that a crime? Can you arrest me for it?"

"No, but we can arrest you when and if you kill Melcor. And it won't be manslaughter like it was for Melcor. It'll be murder."

Lambert shrugged. "What have I got to lose?" he said. And he

went on shaving, methodically.

It was winter now, and he was cold sitting there hunched over the steering wheel. But he was patient, as always. Tonight he felt sleepy too, as he sometimes did. He didn't sleep, however. The cold and his determination kept him awake, kept him watching the lighted window in the Ace Hotel.

It was around eleven-thirty when he saw the light blink out. From long experience, he knew that meant one of two things. Melcor was either going to bed, or he was thirsty. If the latter, he might be appearing at the front door soon.

Tonight it was the latter. The door opened and the familiar figure emerged—small, thin, with the tails of the black overcoat flapping about its legs in the chilly wind. The behavior of the figure was familiar too. It huddled against the wall of the building and looked cautiously up and down the street.

Lambert's movements were mechanical, born of practice and habit. His fingers turned the ignition switch, his foot on the gas pedal urged the engine into almost silent life. But the car itself did not move, showed no betraying lights.

And this was a different car, a new, rented one which hadn't been used before. Yet Melcor was obviously suspicious. He hesitated for a long time. But he must have been overwhelmingly thirsty, too, thirsty and in need of human companionship, human noise, and the sight of human faces. From directly across the street, the lights of the little bar beckoned warmly to him.

When he made his decision, he moved swiftly. One moment he was cowering against the building, and the next he was almost in the middle of the street, running fast. But the car was ready, too. The street was filled with the roar of its engine as its rubber clawed at concrete and it bulleted out from the curb and forward.

Melcor could hear rather than see it coming. He wasted neither time nor energy in turning his head or screaming a protest. He leaped for the only safety there was, the few inches between two parked cars.

Brakes screeched, and the car rocked to a quivering stop. Then the man in the street and the man in the car looked at each other. This was a look of mutual awe and respect, the hunter for his prey's agility and charmed life, the hunted for his enemy's stubbornness and almost superior cunning. Then Melcor, safe for the time being, dashed into the bar.

Lambert backed the car, swung it into its original parking place. He sat for awhile, alone and brooding, letting the excitement of the chase dwindle inside him. Finally, breathing normally again, he too felt the need for a drink. He got out and went into the bar.

He found Melcor sitting in a booth in the dimest corner of the

place. But he had himself a drink, a stiff double shot of whisky, before he went over.

"You were lucky again," Lambert said, sitting down.

Gray-faced, the little man swallowed his drink. Then he said, "I just thought how I could put a stop to this."

"How?"

"I could buy a gun and kill you."

"Why don't you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I couldn't do it."

"Sure you could, Melcor. You've committed murder before. First time's always the hardest."

"It wasn't murder. You're the only one says it was murder." He paused to drink again. "Look, Lambert, why don't you buy the gun? I'd appreciate it very much."

Lambert laughed, and signalled a waiter for new drinks. "You'd appreciate it, would you?"

They sat in silence and drank more whisky, till the effect of the liquor seemed finally to warm Melcor and he talked again. "This is crazy, about as crazy as a thing can get. Outside in the street you just tried to kill me. For three months now you've been trying it over and over again. And yet here we sit, drinking together. Which of us is more insane, I wonder? I really wonder. I am, I guess. You've got a reason for what you're doing. Maybe it's a bad reason, but it makes a kind of sense. But what about me? I'm not making sense. Why don't I try to hide?"

"Because I'd find you. Like I found you the first time."

"Maybe you wouldn't. The odds would be on my side."

"You could never be sure, though."

Melcor nodded, a little sadly. "That's right. I wouldn't be sure. Whether I was in Seattle or Miami, I couldn't be sure. Fifty million cars in the United States, and I'd be afraid of every one of them. No, that wouldn't be any good. I'm tired. Tired of watching for a suspicious-looking car, tired of running across every street like there's a devil behind me, tired of being shadowed, never knowing whether you're there or not, Lambert. I'm not going to run any more."

Lambert felt excitement quickening inside him. Now, he knew, he was close to the end. This was what he'd been waiting for.

"Lambert, I'm going to start acting like a normal human being. I'm going to start walking, and I'm not going to look over my shoulder. You can do whatever you like about it."

Melcor finished his drink, got up, and went out. Lambert sat for a while longer, had another whisky, a toast to victory.

He realized vaguely that he'd been sleeping for a long time. But his first awareness was of a tremendous pain present in his head, as if someone had split his skull with

an axe and the blade had stuck there and couldn't be withdrawn.

"Hello," Sergeant Daniels said to him out of a red haze.

"Have I killed him?" he asked.

"No."

He had thought that he was in a jail cell, but now he realized his mistake. This was still his own room, and the Sergeant was sitting over there beside an ash tray full of stubs.

"What do you want then, Sergeant?" he asked.

"I talked to Melcor this morning. He said you tried to get him last night."

"So you came here to arrest me. Do you have any witnesses?"

"No."

"Didn't you have a tail on me or Melcor?"

"You know I can't spare a man for a detail like that. Oh, I did for awhile, till it dawned on us that Melcor was pretty safe. If a man doesn't want to be run over, he can just stay off the streets. But Melcor says he's changing his tactics. He's out to get you now.

"So?"

"I'd sure like to take you in, Lambert—for your own good."

"What charge?"

Sergeant Daniels shook his head, ignored the question. "If a psychiatrist took a look at you, I've a notion we could put you away for a long time."

Lambert dragged himself painfully out of the bed, lurched toward the window. He braced himself against the panes and rubbed at the condensation on the glass. "What's it doing out there?" he wanted to know.

"Snow and sleet."

The news pierced into his inner consciousness with a stab of joy, making him forget the pain in his head. "Not many cars on the street, huh?" he said, more to himself than to Sergeant Daniels.

"Ann," he whispered, "this is the big day. I'm going to get him today."

"Our child was a boy," she answered.

"There's no light in his window, but I know he's there. I know it. He's trying to fool me, that's all."

"He would have been just two years old," Ann said.

"Perfect weather." He tried, unsuccessfully with his bare hand, to rub the frost of his own breath off the windshield. "They'll have to say it's an accident today. Should have scraped my windshield, though, they'll say. But what do I care what they say? I'm going to kill him today. Won't you be glad of that, Ann?"

"Should I be glad, Hugh?"

"Of course you should. He murdered you and our little boy. I've got to get even . . ."

He saw it then, what he'd been waiting to see, the flapping black overcoat, Melcor! He hadn't seen him emerge from the hotel, but

there he was. Poised on the opposite curb, looking in both directions with normal caution for such a bad night, ready to cross.

"Hugh, don't do it," Ann whispered.

But in frantic haste he turned the ignition key, kicked at the gas pedal. The engine was cold, responded with some slight hesitation. He cursed himself, for not being ready, for sitting here talking with Ann as if there were nothing to be done.

The black overcoat had moved. Melcor was in the street now. Lambert cursed again. Why hadn't he scraped at the ice on the outside of the windshield? It was hard to see through it. No matter. Melcor was an easy target tonight. He was picking his way across the street slowly, absorbed in the problem of the slick pavement underfoot. The car lunged out of its parking place, the back wheels shrieking at the lack of traction, but clawing, making some progress, picking up speed.

"Don't do it, Hugh."

But there it was, the black overcoat, framed in the middle of the windshield like a bird centered in a gunsight. And still unaware, blissfully unaware.

"Don't do it, Hugh."

"Ann, please, let me alone."

"Hugh, if you love me, don't commit murder in my name."

"This isn't murder . . ."

"Don't! Don't do it!"

Then his hands were tearing at the steering wheel, and the car was sliding, skidding, trying to stop. And, finally, the man in the black overcoat heard and knew. His head came up and looked at the oncoming destruction. Lambert saw his face.

With frantic strength, he twisted the wheel hard to his left. As the car rammed into the pole on the opposite side of the street, Lambert knew he had struck the man, sideswiped him. He rushed from the car. His hands shook uncontrollably as he tried to lift the huddled figure to his feet.

"Where'd you get that overcoat?" Lambert was asking, pleading for an answer.

The man was shaking his head dazedly. But Lambert didn't need to hear him say it. He knew Melcor had given the coat to the old tramp. The black coat was a deliberate decoy—and its wearer an innocent victim—to trap Lambert in a manslaughter or perhaps even a murder rap.

Lambert watched as the man staggered away, saw him brush the dirt of the street with one hand from the black coat. With a clear conscience, he decided to let Melcor live with his.

Mac had good reason to drink. After all how many men open a parcel and find their wife's head inside?

Webster Street Lush

BY JAMES M. ULLMAN

TERENCE MACDOUGALL was an object of curiosity in the dim-lit bars along Webster Street, where you had to be very unusual indeed to merit even a raised eyebrow.

He owed his fame to the discovery of a big parcel on his front porch one morning. When he carried the box into his living room and opened it, he found his wife's head inside.

Terence MacDougall had never been quite the same since . . .

He now stood tottering at the corner of Webster and Clay. His topcoat was unbuttoned and flapped wildly in an Arctic northwest wind.

A gaunt, red-eyed man in his late forties, he gazed dully down the length of Webster Street, at row upon row of glittering neon signs. Webster Street was Sin Street in this town. It was wide open tonight, as it was always wide open. It had remained wide open despite the fact that Terence MacDougall's testimony before a grand jury six months earlier had re-

sulted in indictments that sent four of Webster Street's leading citizens to the penitentiary.

Terence MacDougall had never been to Webster Street until the day, shortly after the indictments were made public, that he opened the parcel with his wife's head in it.

Now he came here every night.

He moved slowly along the sidewalk, peering at the faces of the heavily-bundled men who shuffled by. He kept his hands thrust deep in his coat pockets. His lips were pressed tightly together. His long jaw jutted forward, as though daring Webster Street to try something, to make a move.

Finally, he paused before a club somewhat larger than the others on this block. A red neon sign that flashed on and off at two second intervals proclaimed: THE DEN.

Terence MacDougall chuckled.

"The Den," he murmured. "Tony Ariazello's place, I believe. Well, it's a cold night, a fine night to take some libation at The Den and have a few friendly words with Tony . . ."

He barrelled through the swinging doors that opened onto the street, almost up-ending a small man who was coming out. Terence MacDougall ignored the small man's profanity, relating to his having been jostled. He pushed back the inner door and stood motionless for a moment, giving the bartenders, the barmaids, the "26" girl plenty of time to see him.

He smiled.

"Good evening, Nanette," he said grandly to the "26" girl. "You're looking lovely tonight. Is Mister Ariazello around?"

Nanette, a dark girl in her twenties, looked nervously toward the bar for a clue as to how to behave. But the nearest bartender kept his head down, studiously ignoring her. Wetting her lips, she tugged at the thin straps that held her form-fitting red gown.

"I don't know," she said uncertainly. "He was here a while ago, but sometimes he goes out the back way. You'd better ask one of the bartenders."

"Thank you, my dear. I'll do that."

He walked through the length of the place, to the far end of the bar. Here he could sit without the inconvenience of having other customers on either side of him. His passage was slow. He spent a moment surveying every customer in the establishment. Seemingly, he was unaware that people were staring at him and holding whispered conversations, that the normal noise of the place had subsided and died the moment he walked inside.

He took a stool at the far end of the bar. The bartender's look of glum disapproval failed to disconcert him.

"Hello, Charles. A boilermaker, please."

"If you say so, Mr. MacDougall."

"I say so. Ah, that's fine." He picked up the shot glass of whiskey, gazed at it a moment, then downed it quickly and washed away the pleasant, warming taste with beer.

"Very good, Charles. Another shot. Is Mister Ariazello about? I believe I saw his car parked down the block. That obnoxious blue Cadillac."

"I think he's in back," the bartender replied.

"Will you tell him, please, that Terence MacDougall would like to talk to him."

"I'll see if—"

"Thank you. One more thing, Charles. You work here six nights a week. Tell me. Since the last time I saw you, have you ever served a man, a very large man, with a thin, dark moustache?"

"I know," the bartender said wearily. "A thin, dark moustache, a little scar at the left side of his lips, a big gold ring with the head of a skull on the third finger of his right hand. No, Mr. MacDougall, I haven't seen this man. I ain't never seen this man. He's never been in here."

"Never fear," Terence MacDougall said. "He will be, one day . . ."

Tony Ariazello was annoyed at the interruption.

"All right," he said irritably into the telephone, "I'll be out to talk to the old fool. Meanwhile, give him what he wants, so long as he pays for it. We don't want trouble with him. If anyone laid a hand on him in our place, the newspapers would crucify us, after what happened to his wife."

Scowling, he slammed the receiver down on the cradle.

Tony's visitor, a conservatively dressed man who held a sheaf of papers in one hand and a tall drink in the other, asked: "Something wrong?"

"Nothing serious," Tony said. "A damn nuisance, though. Terence MacDougall. That shyster who opened his guts to the grand jury."

"He still around?"

"He comes here every few weeks. He hits all the spots on Webster Street, regular. He's looking for the guy he thinks chopped his wife's head off."

"Now, I'd heard about that," the visitor said thoughtfully. "I didn't know MacDougall was still at it, though. I thought he'd given up."

"He's still at it. If you ask me, he's off his rocker."

"Well," the visitor said, "I suggest you be nice to him. Keep him happy. You're right. We can't lay a hand on him—yet."

Tony Ariazello slowly got to his feet. What he had just heard amounted to an order. Because his visitor was the top Syndicate representative in the city, Terence MacDougall's testimony had almost resulted in an indictment for Tony's

visitor. It had been very close.

"Yes, go on out there," the visitor continued. "Be sociable. The grand jury has been dismissed, Terence MacDougall has been disbarred, his wife is dead. What can we lose?"

Terence MacDougall had consumed four boilermakers. He felt warm and comfortable. He stared boldly at Tony Ariazello, at the dark little man whose hair was so obviously plastered to his skull, who reeked of cheap creams and ointments.

"Tony," he said, "I would like you to convey a message to your friends."

"What friends?" Tony asked blandly.

"Your friends in the Organization. The Syndicate. Whatever the hell you call it now. Don't kid me. I defended you people in the courts for years. I handled your affairs until I couldn't stomach it any more. I expected you to kill me for testifying, to hurt me, but you shouldn't have done what you did, to do that terrible thing to my wife."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tony said.

"All right, Tony. Play it any way you like. But you can tell your friends for me that I won't quit, that I'll go on looking for that man. I'll find him some day. I'll make him talk. I'll make him get down on his knees and beg. I'll make him incriminate the lot of you, for what you did to my wife."

"You better have another drink, Mr. MacDougall. You got me all wrong."

"I got you right, Tony. I've got all of you right. You'd better tell that fat man, the one who did it, never to come back to this town. Because if he does, I'll find him. I'll never rest until I find him."

"Is that all, Mr. MacDougall?"

"It's all for now, Tony."

"Charley, give Mr. MacDougall a drink on the house. Good night, Mr. MacDougall. And I suggest that you go home early. It's very cold outside."

A man was waiting in the shadows of a doorway as Terence MacDougall left The Den. MacDougall stood on the sidewalk, inhaling deep gulps of air.

The man slipped silently from his hiding place. He reached out and grasped Terence MacDougall's left arm.

"Come on, MacDougall."

"What is this," the lawyer demanded.

"Come on. We're parked down the street."

They walked a few steps. The man shoved MacDougall into the back seat of a car. The door had been opened by another man in the front seat.

MacDougall's abductor slipped into the back seat.

MacDougall turned and looked at him. He grinned and shoved his battered hat far back on his head.

"Lieutenant Norris. Is this a new activity of yours? Kidnaping? I'm not sure I liked the way you did that."

"I wanted to talk to you," Lieutenant Norris said. He was a small man, slight, with a narrow, lined face. "I've been trying to talk to you for a week, but you're never at home to me, it seems."

"I don't think," MacDougall said, "there's very much more we have to say."

"Oh, yes there is," Norris said. He put a cigar in his mouth and lit it. "I'm an honest cop, so the department usually gives me the lousy jobs. Right now my job is to see to it that you don't get hurt. And the way you're throwing your weight around down here on Webster Street, you're bound to get hurt."

"I think," MacDougall said, "there are what could be called extenuating circumstances. Tell me . . ." He leaned forward, his smile gone. "What would you do, Lieutenant, if someone sent you your wife's head in a box? Would you laugh it off? Would you try to forget it? Or would you do what I'm doing? Would you haunt the Syndicate places where you're sure this man will turn up some day? The one man you know was directly connected with the crime. You don't have to give me the answer, Lieutenant. I know the answer."

"The police department is still working on your wife's murder," Norris replied.

"You've been working on it for five months," MacDougall said. "After five months, you don't know any more than you did when you started."

"We haven't written it off yet."

"You might as well," MacDougall declared soberly. "There hasn't been a Syndicate murder solved in this town for twenty years."

"You won't help us by getting yourself killed, too."

"What I do," MacDougall said, "is my own business, provided I don't break the law. If I want to spend my time here on Webster Street, there's nothing you can do about it. And I'll level with you, Norris. I intend to keep on coming down here every night, until I find the people who murdered my wife and take care of them in my own way."

"It's stupid," Norris argued stubbornly. "In the first place, it's dangerous. The people down here will tolerate you for a while, while the memory of your appearance before the grand jury and of your wife's murder is still alive. But the day will come when you'll strain their patience. They'll take care of you, just as they took care of your wife. And in the second place, the man you're looking for, this fat man

with the moustache—"

"He's the man I want. He's the man who stopped me on the street, the day before I testified to the grand jury, and told me that if I testified something horrible would happen. And the only other time I saw him was at six o'clock in the morning, when I looked out my window one day and saw him walking away from my front porch. That was the morning I went downstairs and found the box with my wife's head in it. So he's the man I'm going to kill with my bare hands."

"Just a minute. You know the Organization. You know that for a job like the one on your wife, they bring someone in from out of town, from New York, or Brooklyn, or Chicago, or Miami. He stays here long enough to do the job. Then he goes away. And chances are he never comes back."

"I know that," MacDougall admitted. "But there's always a good chance that sooner or later, for one reason or another, he will come back here. And if he does, he'll come to Webster Street. It's his natural environment."

Norris was thinking: even if you found him, MacDougall, we'd have a helluva time proving in court that he did it. The crime lab wasn't able to come up with anything on that box in which your wife's head was delivered. And when we found the rest of her body, floating in the river, we didn't learn anything there, either, except that whoever chopped her head off did a crude job. It's a sure thing the fat man will have an alibi, with a dozen corroborating witnesses.

To MacDougall, Norris said: "I can't make you go home. But I wish you would. For your own good. And for mine, too. It's going to be tough enough, building a case against whoever killed your wife, without you crabbing the act with these drunken forays of yours."

"I repeat," MacDougall said. "What I do is my own business. I'm not breaking any laws. I've had a few drinks and I intend to have a few more. I might even get falling down drunk, Lieutenant. When I do, then you can arrest me as a public nuisance. Meanwhile, if you don't mind, I'll get out of this car. Unless, of course, there's some charge you intend to place against me, and you're going to pull me in."

"No charge," Norris said wearily. "You can go, MacDougall. But if you ask me—"

"Nobody asked you. Good night, Lieutenant."

MacDougall stopped at a few more places on the block. Syndicate places.

In each, he had a boilermaker or two. And in each, he asked the bartender, the "26" girls, the regulars of the place if they had seen a

fat man with a small moustache and a scar at the left corner of his lip, and who had a big ring with a skull on it on the third finger of his right hand.

"No, Mr. MacDougall. We haven't seen anybody like that. Nobody who looks like that has ever been in here . . ."

And he was outside again. He stumbled, overcome by a momentary panic, unable to recall precisely where on Webster Street he was.

It must be two in the morning. Or three. Or later.

The cold wind chilled him, but his coat still hung open. He rested, his arm against a brick wall, peering uncertainly ahead. Another neon sign. THE HAVEN. Oh, yes. This was a Syndicate place, too. But not one of the places that catered to people with money. This place was at the east end of Webster Street, near the river and skid row. The Haven stayed open until dawn in blatant violation of the city closing ordinances. The Haven was for bums and poor people, petty criminals and down-and-out prostitutes. You could pass out cold at a table in The Haven and nobody would disturb you, unless the place was unusually crowded and your chair was needed for a conscious customer. In that case, you'd be picked up and dumped in the alley.

The Haven would do just fine.

Terence MacDougall's entrance into The Haven caused little comment; the Haven was used to strange characters.

"It's that goofy lawyer," a bartender said quietly to one of the barmaids. "Serve him whatever he asks for. We got it from upstairs, don't mess with that guy, he's too hot."

The barmaid elbowed through the crowd. Terence MacDougall had been wavering beside the juke box, a vacant grin on his face, watching a Puerto Rican boy and his girl friend performing a sensuous, almost obscene dance. The barmaid took MacDougall's arm.

"This way, Mr. MacDougall. Come sit at a table, where you'll be comfortable."

"Thank you, my dear. Thank you. Tell me—"

"No, Mr. MacDougall. I ain't seen him, that fat guy you told me about once. I ain't seen him ever."

"That's all right, my dear. You'll remember, though. If he ever turns up, you'll let me know, right away?"

"It's a promise, darling. Now sit back here in the corner. I give you a little table all by yourself, ain't that nice? I'll bring you the usual, sweetheart. You just sit here and stay out of trouble."

Terence MacDougall downed his whisky quickly. Then he sipped leisurely at the beer.

He felt quite at ease with the world.

One thing to be said, he thought,

for crime. It paid well. He had earned enough, as a Syndicate lawyer, to keep him in comfort for the rest of his life. Of course, in view of the fact that he had told everything he knew to that grand jury, his life span was probably limited. He never would have testified if it hadn't been that two smart young investigators in the state's attorney's office had uncovered a few mistakes he'd made and virtually blackmailed him into talking.

So he had told everything, and what he had said led to indictments, for the first time against some of the top local men in the Syndicate. As a result, nobody pressed any charges against Terence MacDougall except, of course, for the disbarment proceedings.

But Evelyn was dead. Lovely, young Evelyn had had her head chopped off. Evelyn's head had been placed neatly into a big box . . .

Terence MacDougall drank some more beer. He signaled for another shot of whisky. Strange, how in all these years, he had never appreciated the virtues of drink. It was only after Evelyn's death that he had learned to drink, to really drink.

MacDougall leaned back in his chair. He tipped his hat far back on his head and picked up the bottle. He took another deep swig.

The girl came in alone. That was unusual, even for the Haven, because she was young and pretty.

A few unattached males eyed her hungrily. In the heat and stench of the Haven she unbuttoned her cheap cloth coat, revealing a black satin dress that clung snugly to her ample curves. Her profession was obvious to every man in the place.

But the men who had watched her looked covertly away when she walked straight to the manager of the place, a red-headed man who had once beaten an obstreperous customer to death with his fists.

Her conversation with the manager was brief. When it ended, she smiled woodenly and slipped through a maze of tables to the corner where Terence MacDougall sat.

She slipped into a chair beside him.

"Hello, darling," she said.

He regarded her coldly.

"I don't know you."

"You could know me, honey. You could know me very well."

"Well, now," he murmured, surveying the taut swell of her breasts, "it's not an unpleasant prospect. Not at all. But you'll forgive me. At my age, I'm suspicious, you see, when a lovely young girl like yourself makes advances to an old man like me."

"It could be," she said, "I'm just earning a living."

"That's likely," he admitted. "And I admire your honesty. But

tell me, do you have the slightest idea who I am?"

"You're Terence MacDougall," the girl said, in a very matter-of-fact way. "You're the lawyer who found his wife's head in a box."

"That's right, my dear. And in view of the circumstances . . ."

She shrugged.

"I don't know what you mean by circumstances," she said. "You're a man. I'm a woman. It never hurts to try."

"May I buy you a drink?"

"Sure."

"I think you're very attractive, young lady. I'd be a liar if I pretended otherwise. But it's an unusual situation."

The waitress came. Terence MacDougall ordered a drink for the girl.

"Maybe," the girl said, "what I have to offer would be good for you."

"It's a possibility. What's your name?"

"Irene."

"Yes, Irene, it's a possibility. But I don't know."

"Listen," the girl said. "You can't be a monk forever. There are things I could show you. For instance . . ."

She brushed against him and spoke softly, almost in his ear . . .

Terence MacDougall held the girl's arm. They stood wavering before a small hotel a block from Webster Street. The biting cold wind numbed both of them.

"Here," she gasped. "This is the place."

They stumbled inside. The desk clerk looked up, saw the girl, then smiled faintly and resumed his reading of the morning paper. MacDougall and the girl crossed the lobby and started up the stairs to the second floor.

"My dear," MacDougall said wearily, "I appreciate your kindness. But it was such a long walk. I do hope you'll have something to drink."

"Don't worry," she assured him. "We'll have a real party."

They reached the second floor landing and moved unsteadily down the corridor. The one-time lawyer was hardly able to stand. The girl had to prop him up, to propel him forward.

"Here, darling. The next door. That's the one, honey. Here."

She fumbled in her purse for the key. MacDougall put his hand on the wall to steady himself.

"You know," he said, "if you'll pardon an old man, I'm still a little suspicious . . ."

She opened the door and pushed it back.

"Inside, darling."

She took his arm and pulled him inside, kicking the door shut with her heel. Then she snapped on the light.

They were not alone in the room.

A man sat on the bed, smiling

at Terence MacDougall.

He was a big man, dressed in a flashy tailor-made suit that must have cost at least two hundred dollars. He was a fat man, with a little moustache and a scar at the left corner of his mouth. On the third finger of his right hand, a skull ring gleamed under the harsh overhead light.

"Good morning, Mr. MacDougall," the man said. "I've been waiting quite a while for the opportunity to renew our acquaintance."

Terence MacDougall fell to his knees and screamed . . .

Lieutenant Norris refused the cigar Tony Ariazello had offered him. He took out his own cigar and lit it.

Ariazello shrugged.

"O.K., Lieutenant. Be proud. I don't give a damn. But I helped you clear up a case now, didn't I?"

"I can't say I approve of your method," Norris said glumly, "but I guess you did."

"A friend of mine and I—he's a business associate—we figured it out tonight," Ariazello said. "You see, this friend of mine and I knew the Syndicate didn't kill MacDougall's wife. Never mind how we knew. We just knew. Oh, the Syndicate had intended to kill MacDougall, all right, but after his wife's murder, and the fuss in the newspapers, the Syndicate wouldn't touch it."

"Frankly," Norris said, "the department never was sold on the idea that Mrs. MacDougall's murder was a Syndicate job. But after his testimony before the grand jury, we didn't dare lay a hand on MacDougall without some solid evidence. All we had was the fact that his wife was quite a bit younger than he was, and that she was running around with other men."

"It was a convenient way for MacDougall to dispose of his wife," Ariazello said. "The head in the box—the dramatic touch, what many people might think of as the Syndicate touch. Good timing, too. Right after his testimony to the grand jury. And he played his part well. He came down here to Webster Street every night, looking for this imaginary representative of the Syndicate, the fat man with the scar. Of course, there was no such man. And we got tired of it, Lieutenant. We got tired of MacDougall's hanging around and asking questions. So tonight we hired this out-of-work actor. We made him up to look like the man with the scar, we planted him in this room and tricked MacDougall into coming to the room."

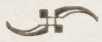
Norris took a deep chew on his cigar.

"All right, Tony. I'll admit your little idea worked. The poor guy broke down and told us the whole thing. He's at headquarters now, spilling his guts."

"Care to stop at my apartment,

Lieutenant? For a little drink? There's a nice young lady there would like to meet you . . ."

"No, thanks. I'm too old for that sort of thing." He started to leave the hotel room, the room where Terence MacDougall had confessed to murdering his wife. "See you in court," Norris said to Tony Ariazello.



It Marked the Spot

Glocia Williams, 34, pleaded guilty in Norfolk, Virginia, on 19 counts of forgery. He had used the money to buy a car, a television set and other articles. The signature that he forged was an "X."

A Bed With Brakes

When John Cowly was arrested for begging in Chicago, he wanted to know what would happen to his car. Officers suggested that he sell the car and give up begging. "But," Cowly protested, "a man's got to have a place to sleep."

Coffee Break

A thief in Potsdam, New York, forced open a window at the Bovay Plumbing Shop, smashed the glass top of a desk, and made off with what appeared to be a $10 bill. F. J. Bovay told officers that the bill was an advertisement. The reverse side bore a notation that the bill was good for one cup of coffee at a local restaurant.

Stolen Supper

In Columbus, Georgia, Mrs. J. C. Simpson put supper in the oven, then left the house to get her husband who had been working. When the couple arrived home supper and the stove were gone. They called police. Shortly later Capt. O. F. Gunn notified the couple that Buck Simpson, no kin to the complainants, was being held for investigation. Gunn said he apprehended the man after seeing him with an oil stove tied to his car. The stove was still warm and cornbread was still in the oven.

Prosecution Rests

When Miami Beach, Florida police arrested Erwin Weber, 49, on charges of possessing burglary tools, they figured they had a good case. In his hotel room they found 600 door keys, 800 blank keys and a set of locksmith files.

I quite agree with you. I think Manhunt is the best short story mystery and detective magazine published.

Manhunt is without a doubt a magazine every one would enjoy for, as you say in your article, the stories are written by only the best authors and all in all it is just tops with me.

Just thought you would like the opinion of one of your readers of Manhunt, and am only sorry it isn't published twice a month instead of monthly. I get all my copies from my local newsdealer here in Florida. Tom, the proprietor, knows just what I'm going to ask for when I come in. Sometimes, due to transportation, the issue is late and then I'm not too happy.

Well, I think this will let you know that one of your readers thinks as you do about Manhunt and have passed on my opinion to many of my friends.

W. J. N.
Orlando, Florida

THE ABOVE of course is a letter from a Manhunt reader—typical of the many letters we receive in response to each issue. We have an idea there will be more letters than ever in response to the issue you are now holding in your hands. Evan Hunter's *The Last Spin* is surely one of the most dynamic stories he has written since *The Blackboard Jungle.* Hal Ellson's power-charged *Anything Goes* will live with you for the next few weeks, at the very least.

Also, this issue contains two novelettes by writers new to Manhunt's pages: Allen Lang *(The Sealed Envelope)* and Albert Simmons *(Invitation to Murder).* What do you think of these two "first-timers"?

Jack Ritchie, C. B. Gilford, C. L. Sweeney, Jr., Norman Struber, Robert S. Swenson—sock stories by these and others round out a magazine we're sure will be talked about.

If you like this issue, tell your friends, won't you?

P.S. And watch the newsstands for Manhunt's big brother, Mantrap.

—Continued from back cover

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